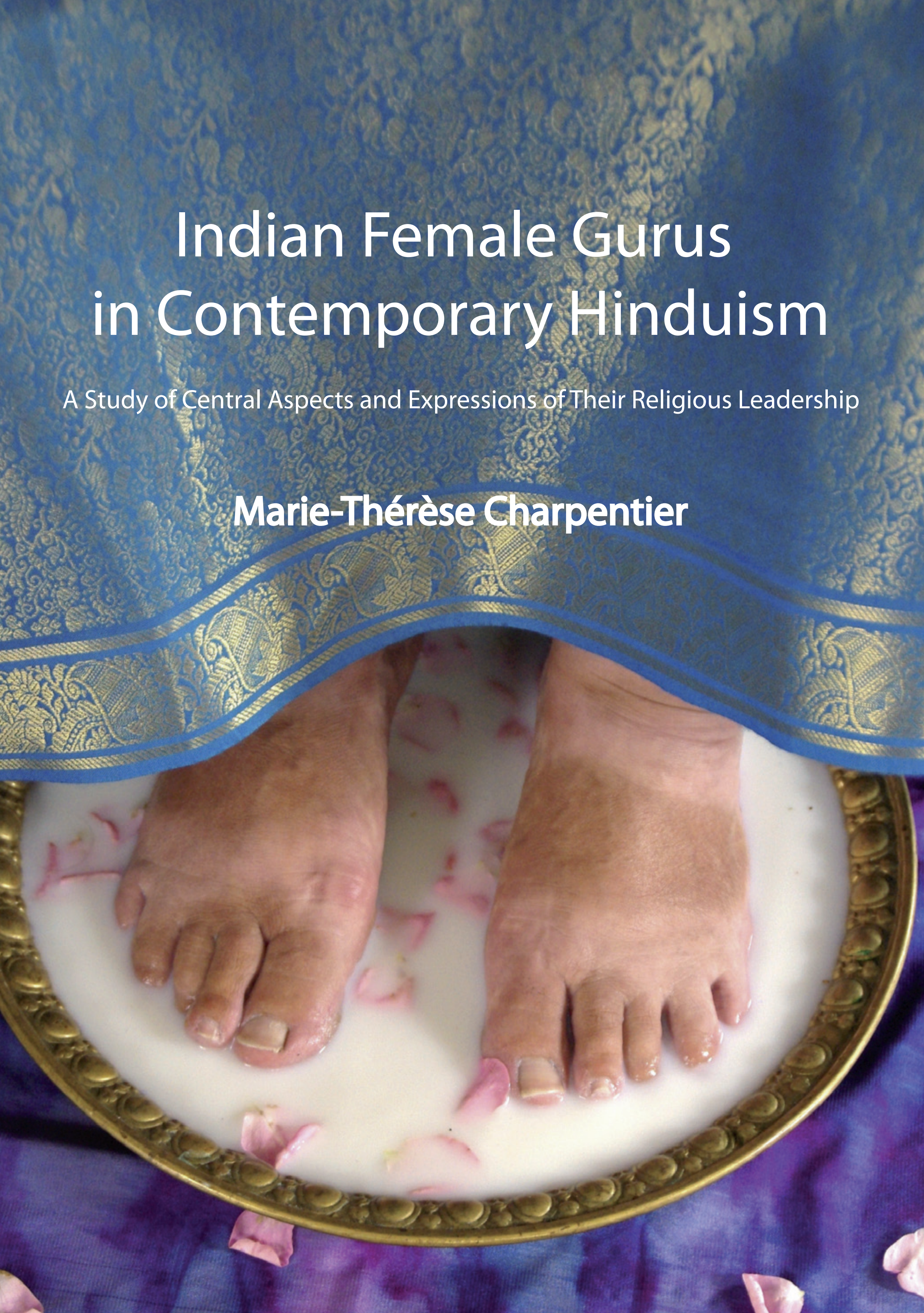
# Indian Female Gurus in Contemporary Hinduism

A Study of Central Aspects and Expressions of Their Religious Leadership

**Marie-Thérèse Charpentier**





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*To Rebecka, Petra, and Erika*

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Tyresö 25.10.2010

Marie-Thérèse Charpentier

# I – Introduction

## 1. Prologue

I am sitting on the floor of a temple covered with colorful carpets, together with some other people, all Indian. Both men and women wear beautiful clothes, the finest they own. The women wear silk saris with golden edgings and gold jewelry and the men are dressed in newly ironed bright silk *dhotīs*. The fragrant perfume of incense sticks permeates the room. In front of the gathered people, a female spiritual master sits cross-legged on a broad, beautifully carved wooden chair covered with a pink silk pillow. To her right, framed pictures of Śiva, Kṛṣṇa, and Hanumān stand on a little table. To her left, a huge bouquet of fresh flowers stands in a vase on the floor. The guru seems to be in her fifties and looks like a queen on a throne. For a short while, maybe two minutes, she sits with eyes closed and a radiant smile on her lips, and only the noise of the fan, which has been switched on especially for my sake, disturbs the silence. When she comes out of her *samādhi*, the guru begins to speak with the people in Hindi. It sounds like a joke, as everybody starts laughing. Some small children begin chasing each other. A few persons rise up from their seats, prostrate before the guru, and leave the room.

A couple enter the room from outside, and go straight to her, as if in a hurry, bowing at her feet with deference. It seems that they know each other well. The couple carry apples in a simple plastic bag and give them to the guru as an offering. Afterwards, they sit a short while on the floor in front of her and a discussion begins. My translator tells me that the couple are worried about their daughter who is sick. She has lost her appetite and seems to be depressed. The guru advises the couple to cook some specific medicinal herbs in water and give it to the daughter to drink twice a day. The couple leave the guru's house after ten minutes and seem markedly relieved. Another woman starts crying when she tells that her husband cannot keep his jobs. The guru consoles the crying woman, dries her tears with her hands and gives her some bananas and *kuṅkum* powder wrapped in a piece of news-

paper, saying that she will make special prayers for her.[1] A young student asks if his decision to study economics is the right one. The guru gives him her blessing, assuring him that everything will be alright. Finally, a young woman asks for spiritual guidance for her home meditation practice, and after having listened patiently to her, the guru gives her new instructions.

## 2. Problem formulation and research questions

When, in the late eighties, I came in contact with two female gurus, I was impressed by the charisma that surrounded them. I had never before met individuals with such a degree of independence, strength, power, and integrity. This overwhelming experience stood in sharp contrast to the prevailing stereotypes about female subordination revealed, among other places, in certain early Hindu texts. In such sources, women were expected to be passive and submissive, without lives of their own, and to worship their husbands as God. As such, they were said not to be able to run religious institutions, become priestesses, or have direct access to spiritual liberation. My experience was also contradicted by the assumptions of certain contemporary scholars who describe a degradation of Indian women's status through history (Altekar 1999).[2] These observations prompted me to raise the following question: How can it be possible in a culture with such traditional stereotypes and beliefs about female subordination, to find so many women in positions of prestige and power?

During the past decades, Indian female gurus have gained greater prominence in the domain of spirituality than ever before. Female gurus, also labeled "spiritual teachers" or "spiritual masters," nowadays hold public religious positions, have their own *āśrams*, impart their own teachings, guide large crowds of devotees, and follow busy schedules of spiritual gatherings. Understood to be the embodiment of divine knowledge by their followers, they hold positions of authority and are highly respected, and a significant number of them are

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[1] *Kuṅkum* is a red powder used in worship and symbolizes *śakti* or female energy. It is considered extremely auspicious.

[2] For a critique of the common assumptions of female subordination held by a number of contemporary scholars, see Kumkum Roy, "In Search of our Past: A Review of the Limitations and Possibilities of the Historiography of Women in Early India," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 30 April 1988, 2–10.

growing in reputation and popularity not only in India but also internationally. In other words, Indian female *gurus* appear to be powerful figures of authority in today's Hindu spirituality.

The overarching purpose of the present study is to explore the phenomenon of Indian female guruhood and spiritual leadership in contemporary Hinduism within the framework of the individual guru-career. Etymologically speaking, gurus are above all "teachers" or "preceptors" (*ācārya*), whose role is primarily to impart the art they have mastered, be it in the field of dance, handicrafts, music, martial arts, or religion. Beside his/her teaching role, a guru is considered a "counselor, father-image, mature ideal, hero, source of strength, even divinity integrated into one personality" (Mlecko 1982: 34).

Gurus as spiritual teachers, female, as well as male, constitute a specific category of religious specialists which is well established in Indian culture. According to most Indian religious traditions, stretching from ancient India to the present day, the existence of a spiritual master as a means for spiritual practices leading to spiritual salvation is considered of the utmost importance. Understood as a person leading people towards what is ideally considered the highest goal of human life, spiritual salvation or enlightenment, the guru or spiritual master is perhaps the most influential religious specialist in Indian culture. Having a spiritual master is common and widely accepted in India since people consider that in the same way that an art teacher is essential for mastering artistic skills, a spiritual teacher is indispensable for mastering spirituality. One reason why guruhood is so central in India might be the fact that Hindu tradition has always given precedence to oral spiritual teachings, rather than written ones (Padoux 2000: 41).

In Tantric contexts, for example, the guru's role is to impart religious knowledge and provide spiritual training to disciples. This can be done through meditation, teachings, expounding and interpreting scriptural texts, energy transmission, worship, and personal guidance. According to the Kulārṇāva Tantra, a Tantric text from the eleventh century CE, a guru should have the following qualities:

> […] one who sets [the disciple] in motion, one who shows [the way], one who explains [the teachings], [one who re-

> veals] [the truth], one who possesses effective knowledge, and one who awakens [the disciple's spirit] (13.128).

Moreover, a guru is expected, at least theoretically, to be a spiritual role model through leading an exemplary life. In Hindu thinking, the foremost criterion for evaluating the credibility and genuine authority of a guru is spiritual knowledge, founded on personal experience of enlightenment. It is claimed that only a guru who completely masters spirituality through enlightenment (a *sadguru*) has the capacity to lead a disciple to complete spiritual salvation. The relationship between the concepts of the guru and of enlightenment will be further treated in Chapters II and V.

The guru should not be mixed up with other holy persons such as the wandering ascetic (*sādhu/sādhvī*, or *sannyāsin/sannyāsinī* doing austerities), the ecstatic *sant* ("saint"), or the *ṛṣi* ("seer") living alone in a remote forest. Their lack of a teaching role in terms of imparting spiritual knowledge disqualifies such holy persons from being regarded as gurus. This entails that while a guru is sometimes a *sannyāsin/sannyāsinī* or renunciant, a *sannyāsin/sannyāsinī* is not necessarily a guru.[3] Similarly, Indian saints are not always gurus.

As the title of the present thesis suggests, all the gurus here investigated are female, all are Hindus, and all are Indian.[4] Due to considerations of space, no attention is paid to non-Indian female spiritual masters following the Hindu path. Moreover, most gurus are contemporary. Although my study includes a few women from the past such as Sharada Devi (1853–1920), I use the term "contemporary," given that the emphasis will be on female gurus alive today.

While I am aware that the term "Hinduism" with its models of classification has been questioned in the postcolonial discourse raging today for being a recent western construction, I claim that metaphysically and theologically speaking, most gurus in the present study are part of the broad, eclectic Hindu tradition, situated within the upaniṣadic fold, sharing more or less well-established notions such as *saṃsāra*, *mokṣa*,

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[3] A *sannyāsin/sannyāsinī* is an ordained Hindu monk/nun.

[4] It should be noted that whereas Anandmurti Gurumaa has a Sikh background and Guru Ma Jyotishanand Saraswati has a Jain background, both are part of the present study as their approach to spirituality appears to be primarily "Hindu" in term of beliefs and rituals.

and karma.[5] They belong to different sub-streams of Hinduism closely related to each other, which borrow from a wide array of philosophical and theological systems such as yoga, *bhakti*, *advaita vedānta*, *tantra*, and śāktism in what might be called "syncretistic Neo-Hinduism," a trend which has strongly influenced educated sectors of Indian society.[6] Each female guru, however, combines these various religious approaches to the divine in a personal way, emphasizing different theological and philosophical aspects to different degrees, using different sets of holy texts, revering various gods as their main chosen deity (*iṣṭadevatā*), worshiping with different rituals, and having different views of cosmogony and of the nature of salvation.

In the present study, the presentation of the "institution" of the female guru and its various expressions, in the India of today, will be described and analyzed as meaningfully as possible, with the help of the literature as well as material from my own fieldwork experiences. To illustrate my study, I have chosen to focus more specifically upon four female spiritual masters, all active today. Hence, my concern is less to engage in in-depth studies of particular women than to investigate the phenomenon of contemporary female guruhood more generally by examining a number of aspects or themes associated with it. The four specific examples presented in Chapter II and referred to throughout my study should thus be considered as serving to make

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[5] One standpoint is the constructionist argument claiming that Hinduism was invented and imagined by British scholars and colonial administrators. Vasudha Dalmia (1995), Robert Frykenberg (1997), Christopher Fuller (2004), John Hawley (1991), Gerald Larson (1995), Harjot Oberoi (1994), Brian K. Smith (1998), Heinrich von Stietencron (1995 and 1997) and Balagangadhara (1994) are scholars embracing this standpoint. According to postcolonial scholars, Orientalists had a considerable impact in providing a monolithic picture of Indian society. Proponents of the postcolonial stance claim that the reason why Hinduism is presented as a unified religion is that it is modeled upon Christianity. The claim that Hinduism was created by western nineteenth-century scholars has however been questioned from various points of view by several scholars including Babb (1986), Doninger (1991), Ferro-Luzzi (1997), Hiltebeitel (1991), Cynthia Talbot (1995), and Peter van der Veer (1994). See also Brian K. Pennington (2005) and J.E. Llewellyn (2005).

[6] The term "Neo-Hinduism" which came into use around the 1870s has been investigated by the Indologist Paul Hacker, among others. According to Hacker, although traditional Hinduism and Neo-Hinduism are not unified systems of ideas, they differ from each other. What distinguishes the two systems is that contrary to traditional Hinduism, Neo-Hinduism is strongly influenced by Western culture and Christianity, the latter having incorporated and assimilated foreign elements in order to reinterpret and remodel old Hindu concepts (Hacker 1995: 230–232). According to Hacker, whereas traditional Hinduism maintains continuity with the past, for Neo-Hindus, "the continuity with the past is broken" (Hacker 1995: 232).

my presentation clearer and more vivid in order to address more general issues.

I would like to start with a couple of questions I am often asked, both by people interested in spirituality and by those not at all acquainted with religious issues, and which will operate as point of departure for raising further questions. When people find out that I am working on the issue of female guruhood, a common reaction is: "Are there really female gurus?"

The present thesis suggests new ways of looking at the silent history of women by making visible female guruhood and by bringing women's involvement in religion into view. By taking into account the existence, religious involvement, life stories, and experiences of Indian female gurus, I hope to be able to provide a wider perspective and a deeper understanding of the somewhat asymmetrical treatment until recently given to Indian female spiritual mastery in scholarly studies. It should be mentioned in passing that this asymmetrical treatment is not only reflected in scholarship but also in Sanskrit terminology. Whereas the word *guru*, – contrary to Karen Pechilis's claim – does have a feminine form (*gurvī*) in Sanskrit, it is generally not used in female guru contexts thus suggesting that the guru role is traditionally regarded as primarily masculine (Pechilis 2004a: 5–6).

Another frequently asked question is "How does one become a guru?" In the present thesis, I make use of that key question as a point of departure for investigating the spiritual "career" of female spiritual masters, asking what makes them into gurus. As we will see, their religious activity is located simultaneously in human and spiritual realms, and throughout my study, my focus of attention will be these two seemingly contradictory realms of social and spiritual demands.

That key question gives rise to further questions concerning how female religiosity finds expression: What is the socioreligious context of the gurus like in terms of their social, familial, educational, and religious environment? Why do women choose to dedicate themselves to spirituality? What specific deeds or activities are attributed to them? What do they do to capture the interest of people around them? What roles do they display as spiritual teachers? Are signs that a woman is an exceptional being of heightened spirituality already visible from childhood? Does the sociocultural and socioreligious en-

vironment surrounding a guru's upbringing have an impact on her spiritual choice?

Furthermore, I examine the relationship between asceticism and spiritual leadership by exploring what it means to a female spiritual master, to be simultaneously woman and guru. With help of my material, I ask the following questions: What does female asceticism look like? Are female gurus organized or institutionalized through specific sectarian affiliations? Do they follow authoritative religious traditions sanctioned by the orthodoxy? If not, what legitimates the position they occupy? In addition, I examine female guruhood in relation to the institutions of marriage and celibacy. In a country where the socioreligious and sociocultural context emphasizes women's duty or *strīdharma*, exhorting women to marry and beget sons, can we discern tensions between the gurus' religious inclinations and the social expectations put on womanhood? How do gurus' entourages respond to women's spiritual calling? How are tensions, if any, handled?

Moreover, given the significance of female imagery in Hindu society, and the challenge posed by Mahādevī, the great goddess being creator of the universe, I work on the assumption that goddess worship has helped pave the way for the contemporary female gurus' existence. According to a widespread Hindu belief, mankind is at the very end of the *kaliyuga* or "dark age," which is perceived as a particularly auspicious time for the "descent" of the divine into human bodies. Accordingly, my focus will partly be on these "manifestations" or "incarnations" of the divine, examining in what ways they come to expression. As we will see, it happens quite frequently that female gurus appropriate the goddess's role in a more or less dramatic manner, and the question to consider is how one can explain such behavior. In other words, is it a sign of oppression or mental disability, as certain scholars suggest, or is it the expression of traditional religious ideals? I also examine how devotees view female gurus, and how gurus perceive and respond to followers' perceptions and expectations in light of goddess symbolism.

In the present study, I use all the questions described above as a springboard to address more general issues revolving around gender, authority, power, and empowerment. More specifically, I reflect on the following questions: How do women grow into spiritual leadership and what sanctions their spiritual roles? Is female involvement in

religious matters controversial, and if so, what is controversial about their activities? What benefits, if any, do followers gain from their encounter with female gurus? How do goddesses relate to actual women? Are the centrality of goddess imagery and the presence of goddesses in the Hindu pantheon a reflection of a positive evaluation of women in everyday Indian life? Do female gurus challenge cultural and religious norms of gender ideology and contribute to modifying the codes of social conformity prevalent in Indian society? Finally, does the spiritual involvement of female gurus contribute to shaping and transforming Indian religious discourses and practices? I wish to underline that while this may seem like an excessive number of highly conflated issues and research questions, I find it necessary to address them as I believe that only a multi-layered study reflecting all the complexity of my material is able to do justice to the guruhood phenomenon.

I have collected data on many female gurus sharing a more or less common broader Hindu tradition, and have looked at particular cases and systematically compared them. While reading and hearing stories of birth, childhood, upbringing, adolescence, initiation, and miracles, I have detected general patterns of life and behavior. These events constitute important phases of the guru's spiritual career, partly reflecting the ambient culture. However, although the lives of these women show similarities in many respects, each one is also unique, shaped by her own life experiences, practiced in her own specific surroundings and own forms of religiosity. Various hagiographical accounts indicate that already from a tender age, most of the women displayed an inexplicable fascination for spirituality. In fact, all the gurus claim that they were "called" to spiritual life from "within," be it through a dream, a voice, visions, intuition, or direct contact with a deity. They are thus suggesting that they were in early contact with a sacred power or transcendence, independently of each other and of the contextual culture. Hence, we can say that their ways of living and being are highly individual, and defy categorization and generalization.

## 3. Previous research

Whereas male renunciation and asceticism have been given much attention over the past decades and have received extensive treatment

in different publications representing a wide range of approaches, female asceticism has long been overlooked. It is only recently that it has started drawing the interest of scholars, and a few contributions to the field have been produced in recent years. As far as I am aware, six anthropological or semi-anthropological studies and one sociological monograph, each focusing upon one, or in one case two, specific gurus have so far been produced. In her monograph, *Mother of Bliss: Ānandamayī Mā (1896–1982)*, Lisa Lassell Hallstrom gives a colorful portrait of Anandamayi Ma from Bengal, one of India's most well-known female spiritual masters. Portraying the guru in a crosscut manner, exploring her different roles as woman, saint, spiritual teacher, *avatāra*, and divine mother, the author succeeds in creating a narrative weave that provides a detailed and nearly exhaustive picture of Anandamayi Ma's life and personality (Lassel Hallstrom 1999).

An unpublished licentiate thesis, *Le Culte postmortem des Saints dans la Tradition Hindoue: Expériences Religieuses et Institutionnalisation du Culte de Mā Ānandamayī (1896–1982)*, written by Orianne Aymard is also available. Focusing specifically upon Anandamayi Ma, the author explores how the cult evolved after her death. The study is based, among others things, on field studies where different aspects and expressions of the postmortem cult phenomenon are investigated, such as the cult's organization and function, as well as the impact of the death of the saint (Aymard 2008).

Catherine Clémentin-Ojha's study, *La Divinité Conquise: Carrière d'une Sainte*, deals with the *vaiṣṇava* guru Shobha Ma (1921–) in Varanasi. Unlike Lassell Hallstrom, she offers a more "linear" account of this heterodox guru's spiritual career, trying to make sense of the complicated vicissitudes of her *Nimbārkī* affiliation (Clémentin-Ojha 1990).

Judith Coney's *Sahaja Yoga: Socializing Processes in a South Asian New Religious Movement* is a sociological study focusing upon Nirmala Devi (1923–) from Maharashtra and her spiritual movement *Sahaja Yoga*, presented from a so-called, "New Religious Movement" (NRM) approach. Coney explores how Western newcomers adopt new India-oriented spiritual teachings and practices when becoming full-time

members, and "how this continues to affect those who leave the movement."[7]

In *Hindu Selves in the Modern World: Guru Faith in the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission*, Maya Warrier explores the relationship between religion and modernity in the contemporary Indian urban environment of high technology, mass communications, and global connections, through the example of Mata Amritanandamayi (1953–) from Kerala. Maya Warrier argues that Amritanandamayi's spiritual enterprise responds to devotees' modern lifestyles and attitudes, and effectively adapts traditional symbols and meanings to answer the needs of a modern context (Warrier 2005).

Finally, Birgit Heller's monograph, *Heilige Mutter und Gottesbraut: Frauenemanzipation im Modernen Hinduismus* is a comparative gender study of the Hindu guru Sharada Devi (1853–1920) from Bengal and the *liṅgayāt* guru Mate Mahadevi (1946–) from Karnataka (Heller 1999).[8]

Two popular studies focusing upon a few female gurus have also been written, one by Linda Johnsen, *Daughters of the Goddess: The Women Saints of India* (Johnsen 1994), and one by Timothy Conway, *Women of Power and Grace: Nine Astonishing, Inspiring Luminaries of Our Time* (Conway 1994). These studies, which are distinguished from academic works by their more or less adulatory style, do not provide any analysis of the phenomenon from a particular, theoretical approach but content themselves with giving a series of portrayals of, among others, some contemporary Indian female spiritual masters' lives and missions. Furthermore, at least three popular monographs on Amritanandamayi, written in the same spirit by three of her disciples, have so far been published: *Getting to Joy: A Western Householder's Spiritual Journey with Mata Amritanandamayi* (Poole 2000), *The Path of the Mother* (Bess 2000), and *Amma: Healing the Heart of the World* (Cornell 2001).

When I started working on the present thesis, no extensive scholarly study exploring the issue of Indian female gurus had been undertaken. However, in 2004, no less than three significant contributions to

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[7] Cover, Coney 1999.

[8] Although Liṅgāyatism dissociates itself from certain Brahmanical beliefs and practices, most scholars and practitioners agree that it is a part of Hinduism. Accordingly, Mate Mahadevi has been included in the present study.

the field – all from the United States – were published. All have proven highly valuable to my work. Meena Khandelwal's monograph *Women in Ochre Robes: Gendering Hindu Renunciation* is an ethnographical study of *sannyāsinīs* in Haridvar, examining, among other things, the conflict female spiritual renunciants experience between social responsibility and ascetic withdrawal (Khandelwal 2004). That publication was followed by *Female Ascetics in Hinduism*, written by Lynn Teskey Denton, which explores female asceticism in Varanasi. The author approaches the issue by focusing upon two *dharmas*, or religious paths followed by women, that commonly recur in Indian religious tradition: woman-as-householder and woman-as-renunciant (*sannyāsinī*). It explores the social and personal backgrounds of renunciants, their institutions, and their ways of life (Teskey Denton 2004).

Moreover, Meena Khandelwal, Sondra L. Hausner and Ann Grodzins Gold's anthology, *Women's Renunciation in South Asia: Nuns, Yoginis, Saints, and Singers*, provides a series of portraits of female renunciants from India, Nepal, and Bangladesh from a cultural and gender perspective (Khandelwal, Hausner, and Grodzins Gold 2006). Another recent anthology with a somewhat different perspective, *Gurus in America*, gives in-depth analyses of nine contemporary male and female Hindu gurus. In addition to an account of each guru's teachings and a discussion of the history and configuration of the movement which arose around their person, the authors address the religious and cultural interaction that occurs when Indian gurus offer their teachings in America, examining how their representations of Hinduism and their self-identities are affected by the change of cultural milieu (Forsthoefel and Humes 2005).

The study most closely related to my own work, at least in some respects, is an anthology titled *The Graceful Guru: Hindu Female Gurus in India and the United States* by Karen Pechilis. It is based on the life and mission of eleven gurus, studied in their historical, cultural, and religious context, and revolves around complex overall issues such as the encounter between East and West, charismatic vs. institutional authority, cultural syncretism, and the meaning of gender for the comprehension of the guru phenomenon (Pechilis 2004). Although I share many of Karen Pechilis's concerns, my handling of the subject and presentation of the material differ from her's. My thesis on Indian female gurus focuses less upon particular women and more on gu-

ruhood as a phenomenon. In other words, it is less a microscopic approach than a macroscopic one, depicting the spiritual career of female gurus, examining, among other things, the social and religious background along with the patterns of holiness in guru spirituality from women's childhood, adolescence, calling, and initiation, until their recognition and establishment as spiritual teachers.

Besides monographs and anthologies, a few scholarly articles have also been published during the past two decades. Some of them explore female religiosity and/or female religious leadership in Hinduism in broad outline and sometimes devote some space to contemporary female spiritual masters (Young 1987 and 1994; King 1984; Narayanan 1999). Other articles focus more specifically upon female gurus or female renunciation (Ojha 1981 and 1984; Clémentin-Ojha 1985; Johnsen 1988; Teskey Denton 1992; Falk 1995; Heller 1998; Martin 1999; Khanna 2002b; Kishwar 2003).[9] All have been a source of inspiration for me and will be referred to throughout my study.

## 4. Theoretical and methodological approaches

### 4.1 Paden's perspective of comparative religion

Like anthropologists, I have undertaken fieldwork out of an interest in the way some female gurus live their lives and perform their religious activities within the framework of a personal guru career. This fieldwork has given me the opportunity to find out for myself many interesting aspects of female gurus' lives, worldviews, and missions. Through that exploration, I have gained an idea of what it means to be an Indian guru in today's Hinduism. I have not, however, shared the lives of the gurus presented in my study to the same extent an anthropologist would do. Nevertheless, my observations of the gurus' behavior, the environment surrounding their person, and my interactions with gurus and their followers have helped me to understand, describe, and formulate the phenomenon of guruhood.

Although my working methods resemble an anthropological approach, I have conducted the examination of women's religiosity and its origins, formulation, and effects in a specific time and culture in a

[9] See also Charpentier, "Māte Mahādēvi: a Progressive Female Mystic in Today's India", *Temenos: Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion* [Forthcoming].

somewhat different way than is customary when putting the anthropological perspective into practice. Instead, my interpretive framework is primarily characterized by the comprehensive perspective of comparative religion (*Religionswissenschaft*).

As a starting point and background for my theoretical efforts, I now intend to present some general features of comparative religion as described by William E. Paden. According to Paden, the comparative religious perspective "looks at religion as a subject matter that can be understood in terms of its own comparative patterns" and expresses itself "through the languages of myth, symbol, and ritual" (Paden 2003: 67; 70). Paden presents the four cornerstones of the modern comparative approach to the study of religion. According to him, the first characteristic stressed in this approach is its phenomenological method, – that all religious facts are considered "phenomena" rather than items that are intrinsically true or false (Paden 2003: 73). In other words, religious expressions are not something to be taken as true or illusory, but are regarded as facts or sets of data to be noted and understood. The aim of the phenomenological method is to explore *all* human religious phenomena as objectively and scientifically as possible, thus avoiding privileging certain materials as "higher" and others as "lower" (Kinsley 2002: 1).

The second cornerstone of this approach consists of the need to synthesize the facts through the analysis of patterns, comparative categories, recurring structures, and forms that can be classified and analyzed (Paden 1994: 41). The third characteristic of the comparative approach emphasizes the need to understand all religious phenomena or religious expressions in terms of their contexts (Paden 1994: 46). Accordingly, whatever a religious phenomenon may mean to the scholar or interpreter, the focus is put upon what it signifies to the believer, be it guru or follower. As Paden puts it, "there is nothing religious apart from religious people [and therefore] what religious things 'are' is precisely what they *mean* to those people" (Paden 1994: 47).[10] This "science" of interpretation, also called "hermeneutics," states that human life is never devoid of meaning.

The final cornerstone of the comparative approach is the need to identify what makes religious fact religious. Paden states that what

[10] Paden's emphasis.

gives religion its specific character has to do with the concept of the *sacred*, namely "those focal objects which to the insider seem endowed with superhuman power and authority," and have their own characteristics and, their own language (Paden 2003: 72). In his view, any object can become a vehicle of sacred power: a god, scripture, religious leader, religious institution, river, or mountain – and convey superhuman meaning (Paden 2003: 72).

In the present thesis, the comparative approach as outlined by Paden will be taken into account. Although I am concerned with the phenomenon of female guruhood, what it looks like, how it is experienced, and what it means to the people involved – performers, followers, as well as hagiographers – I also believe that modern Hindu phenomena are never totally new. They never live their own lives in a sociocultural and socioreligious vacuum, but are instead part of the ambient environment. Accordingly, I will present religious phenomena in light of certain indigenous religious or socioreligious paradigms, concepts, ideals, and models, which all reflect the ideologies of the proper socioreligious and sociocultural context. Throughout this thesis, we will see how some aspects of the guru phenomenon are closely related to religious concepts which are part of a broader Hindu framework. Accordingly, concepts such as *śakti*, *avatāra*, and *bhāva*, or paradigms such as *strīdharma*, *pativratādharma*, or *varṇāśramadharma*, and assumptions about family or sexuality, all of which are intimately associated with the Indian sociocultural, sociohistorical, and socioreligious environment will be presented and examined. I am aware that by contextualizing different aspects of female spiritual leadership, I do not strictly follow the phenomenological approach mentioned above, but also give space to my own scholarly voice, alongside my concern to help women's and followers' voices be heard.

## 4.2 A gender approach

The comparative approach presented above has been criticized for its claims of detached scholarship and scientific, objective neutrality. I agree with that view, believing that scholarship can be objective only to a certain extent. As David Kinsley puts it, "all scholarship has an agenda and […] it is best to be aware of what it is" (Kinsley 2002: 10). Preferences, predilections, and dislikes concerning what may be

viewed as politically correct at a given moment, and incorrect at another, influence scholarly enterprise, consciously or unconsciously. As far as I am concerned, I have chosen to pay attention to gender perspectives, which have been subject of an unprecedented interest in scholarly contexts during the past three decades. Although I do not call myself a feminist and do not consider this to be an outright gender study, I am interested in gender matters. Moreover, I believe that in a study exploring Indian female spiritual leadership, the gender approach can not be totally waved aside, and I will therefore pay attention to that issue throughout my thesis.

One of the main contributions of gender studies is its critique of the androcentrism underlying most traditional scholarship. As Lena Gemzöe puts it, "androcentrism is an, often unconscious, tendency to see the world exclusively from men's perspective and to assume that this perspective is also valid for women" (Gemzöe 2000: 1). Kinsley states that recent scholarship has demonstrated that traditional studies on religions have been biased, being primarily concerned with men's religious perceptions, experiences, and practices.[11] Commenting on this state of affairs, he claims that until recently, "Incorporating materials on women's religious practices and beliefs often resulted not so much in elaborations of previously stated generalizations about a given tradition as in subversion of such generalizations" (Kinsley 2002: 4). That insight is particularly pertinent and will inform different sections of this thesis, such as Chapter V examining religious affiliation, and Chapter VI examining marital status. In a culture where the concept of *śakti*, or female spiritual energy is so central, it would be noteworthy if it had not contributed to contradicting certain well-established male religious notions and ideals, and if it had not thereby had a positive impact on women's religiosity.

I am keen to mention that I do not view the comparative and gender approaches in the present study as mutually exclusive, but instead as compatible. Each has links to the other in terms of presuppositions and methods, e.g. in their goal of rejecting the superimposition of all kinds of distorting preconceptions. In that respect, I agree with Katherine K. Young who states that while phenomenologists "want to prevent the unconscious superimposition of values, categories, interpre-

[11] Kinsley 2002: 4.

tations, and theories on things so that the nature of 'things' might be revealed […] feminists want to prevent the unconscious superimposition of *patriarchal* values, categories, interpretations, and theories […] so that the real facts about, and the experiences of, women might be revealed" (Young 2002: 26).

## 4.3 Gender, power, subordination, empowerment and agency

Spiritual leadership, and more specifically female spiritual leadership, is closely related to issues of authority. In a study examining four marginal religious Christian groups from the nineteenth century, all led by women in the United States, Mary Farrell Bednarowski states that four characteristics are required in order for women to achieve leadership and gain positions of authority: a perception of God that deemphasizes the masculine, regarding the divine as either an impersonal principle, feminine, or androgynous; a doctrine that does not view women as a source of evil; a perception of gender roles that does not emphasize marriage and motherhood; and a rejection of institutional modes of leadership (Bednarowski 1980: 207). In the concluding chapter of the present study, I will examine how female gurus fit Bednarowski's postulations.

Authority revolves around power structures, agency, dominance, subordination, and empowerment, concepts which have received extensive attention in scholarly gender studies in recent decades. They are part of the field of modern social science and usually have a secular agenda, examining agency primarily in terms of self-expression in relation to social and political oppression. Issues of dominance and subordination have also been explored in socioreligious contexts, among others, by the theologian Rita Gross in what she calls "feminism as a social vision" (Gross 1996: 21). Taking her starting point in the assumption that patriarchy – literally "rule by fathers" – where men have power over women, is prevalent in Indian society, Gross argues that men monopolize and dominate roles and positions which are culturally highly valued, such as for example spiritual leadership. She states that in patriarchal societies, men are believed to set rules and limits for women and those who do not conform are subjected to resistance from their social surroundings (Gross 1996: 23).

The concepts of power and empowerment have been contested for their "fuzziness", i.e. the difficulty to define and measure them clearly. In her article "Resources, Agency, Empowerment: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment," the social economist Naila Kabeer examines and conceptualizes the notions of power and empowerment (Kabeer 2002: 18). According to her definition, power is the ability to make strategic life choices such as the decision whether or not to marry, whether to beget children and how to live the life one wants. She states that choice has three interrelated dimensions: access to valued *resources*, be they material, social, or individual, that enable people to improve their situation, such as economic resources, relationships, networks, skills, and knowledge; *agency*, referring to the capacity to define one's own life choices and to pursue one's own goals, even when one meets resistance from others; *achievements* or outcomes of these choices, referring to the ability to realize ways of "being and doing" valued by the social environment of a given context (Kabeer 2002: 20–22).

Power is closely related to the issue of empowerment, and Naila Kabeer defines the term as follows: "Empowerment […] refers to the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them" (Kabeer 2002: 19). In other words, empowerment presupposes disempowerment or denial of choices. She also believes that empowerment operates at three different kinds of levels. The first is what she calls "immediate levels" such as individual resources (power of decision-making, access to income earning, education, land, credit, health), as well as people's agency and achievements in their capacity to act. Empowerment can also operate at "intermediate levels" through various institutional rules and norms prevailing in the economic, social, and political spheres of life. The third dimension operates at "deeper levels" such as hidden, structural relations of class/*varṇa*/gender. Kabeer claims that depending on which dimension of empowerment one chooses to focus upon, the notion of power and the process of challenging existing power relations to bring about social change will be conceptualized differently (Kabeer 2002: 27–28).

Besides these secular perceptions of "empowerment", spiritual dimensions of the term are often referred to by scholars of theological

gender studies.[12] In an investigation of agency and empowerment among eighteenth-century female Quakers, for example, Phyllis Mack claims that religion provides a significant dimension of empowerment related to the desire for self-transcendence. She believes that the achievement of the enlightened state is particularly significant in that respect, as it is said to provide agency (Mack 2007: 434). Issues of authority, power, subordination, agency, and empowerment associated with Indian female spiritual leadership will be presented in Chapter V when examining the issue of religious affiliation and charisma. They will also be discussed more extensively, in light of, among others, Kabeer's and Mack's assumptions in Chapter VII, focusing upon the expressions and significance of goddess imagery and worship in relation to female guruhood, and in Chapter VIII, focusing upon the issue of norms and norm-transgression.

## 4.4 Deprivation theory

When women's involvement in religious activities has been examined in scholarship, it has sometimes been perceived in the light of deprivation theory. Deprivation theory suggests that when people suffer from intense subordination, be it political, economic, ideological, or social, they might use religion as a safety valve. In his renowned *Ecstatic Religion,* I. M. Lewis argues that in societies where women are subordinate, religion offers a means to obtain material, emotional, or social benefits otherwise unavailable in their disadvantaged position (Lewis 1989: 26–28). Melford Spiro, for his part, has stressed the sexual aspect of female attraction for religion. According to him, spirit possession might be a way of seeking sexual satisfaction in cultures where women's sexuality is surrounded with restrictions (Spiro 1984: 47–48).

Bruce Lincoln is of the same opinion when analyzing female initiation rites. He claims that contrary to what takes place in male initiation rites, females do not improve their status through initiation, as it remains connected with their roles as mothers and wives. He states that "woman per se has no status. Status is the concern of the male, and women are excluded from direct participation in the social hierarchy" (Lincoln 1981: 102). According to him, female initiation

[12] Not primarily among scholars researching Hinduism, but Christianity.

"makes even the harshest existence worthwhile," "[elevating] life above boredom, mindlessness and despair" and functions "as an opiate, a comforting and intoxicating fantasy provided for those who will never be granted power or position" (Lincoln 1981: 108). This claim is made despite the fact that Lincoln considers female initiation rites to be widespread. Deprivation theory has been criticized by, among others, Susan Starr Sered who disagrees with the idea that female involvement in religious life should be explained in light of social or psychological deprivation (Sered 1994: 62–66). Deprivation theory will be referred to in the present study when discussing marital status and issues of power and subordination.

## 4.5 "Women as agents" and "'Woman' as symbol"[13]

In addition to the androcentric perspective mentioned above, another pitfall when studying women and religion is the ethnocentric approach. Whereas a number of Indian and Western Indologists and historians of religion, as well as Christian missionaries during India's colonial period took women's submissive, passive, and practically insignificant role in society as their starting point, postcolonial voices – both from Western and so-called Third World feminists – have grown increasingly stronger. Third World feminists criticize the perception of the female "other," victimized by assumptions of inferiority and sinfulness, emphasizing instead women's autonomy and agency. A number of monographs and, more specifically, articles written in that spirit have been published with the intention of criticizing the ethnocentric point of view.[14]

The discrepancy related to the divergent perceptions of women's subordination versus agency appears to primarily have originated from confusion between two ontologically distinct categories: real women and women as stereotypes. In her cultural approach to religion, Susan Starr Sered makes a distinction between actual women,

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[13] The expression is taken from Susan Sered 1999: 193.

[14] The debate, which started within Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, has during the last decade even included Buddhism and Hinduism. Postcolonial feminists claim that the reason why ideas of female subordination were so widely emphasized is that they contributed to justifying the presence of colonialists in India. See, for example, Kirin Narayan, *Storytellers, Saints and Scoundrels: Folk Narrative in Hindu Religious Teaching*, Delhi 1992, 70–72 or Veena T. Oldenburg, "May you Be the Mother of a Hundred Sons: A Journey Among the Women of India," *Manushi: A Journal of Women and Society*, 84, 39–43, 1994, [Book Review].

what she calls “Women as agents,” and “‘Woman’ as symbol”. Whereas in religious contexts, “Women as agents,” i.e. actual women have varying degrees of agency and are able to choose whether to worship and what image to worship freely, “‘Woman’ as Symbol” is understood as a cultural icon, “a symbolic construct conflating gender, sex, and sexuality, and comprised of allegory, ideology, metaphor, fantasy […]” (Sered 1999: 194). According to Sered, the dichotomy of women-as-agents and Woman-as-symbol tends to be conflated in studies within various scholarly fields and the confusion between these two categories has in particular negatively affected the study of religion and gender. Scholars of religion are held responsible for having mainly focused upon “Woman,” thus contributing to shaping cultural misunderstandings of women’s actual lives (Sered 1999: 196).

Looking at the issue of symbolism, the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, states that religious symbols should not be viewed merely as a reflection of a sociocultural structure, transcribing social values, but instead as pointing out a meaning (Ricoeur 1972: 310–311). According to Victor Turner, symbols are “polysemic”, i.e. they can be used in multiple ways, thus reflecting a multiplicity of meanings (Turner 1974: 19–20). What is interesting about symbols is that both men and women select and use particular symbols at different times for different purposes. Men and women alike have the power to generate and manipulate symbols, thus promoting different readings or interpretations. These interpretations are influenced by various factors such as the power position, gender, and age, of the people holding them. As such, symbols do not appear to be clear, definite, and consistent entities, but instead products of people’s inner projections, i.e. their subjectivity.

Discussing women as symbols in various religions, Sered differentiates between what people perceive as “good” symbols and “bad” ones (Sered 1999: 195–196). Good and bad symbols are reflected in the widespread stereotypical Madonna/Whore dichotomy. Generally speaking, negative perceptions of women traditionally revolve around female sexuality. As Ria Kloppenborg puts it,

> Women have been described as unstable, irrational, incapable of logical thinking, connected with the world of matter because of their female physique and reproductive

> function; and they are seen as temptresses, connected with the destructive and evil, satanic and dark sides of the human experience. Women are, furthermore, regarded as emotional beings, and uncontrollable when not protected by male authorities, whether these are male family members or religious authorities. (Kloppenborg 1995: VII)

Similar views are found in traditional Hindu texts such as Manusmṛti, picturing women as bad, lustful, heartless, and fickle (IX.15), and thus needing supervision by fathers, husbands and sons (IX.3; IX.16). Such patriarchal stereotypes have not been generated solely by Vedic Brahmanical male rhetoric revolving around female ritual purity/impurity but are, as Sered's study suggests, also part of the heritage of most religious traditions. According to Lina Gupta, patriarchal projections of this kind are based on fear. They suggest that independent women are threatening and this argument is used to legitimate patriarchal control and to limit women's power (Gupta 1997). The use of projections to serve men's patriarchal needs is particularly explicit in the context of religious fundamentalism where women are reduced to being symbols (Gross 2000: 105; Sered 1999: 201).[15]

One concept that is especially challenging to Indian notions of power/powerlessness is *śakti*, or inner spiritual energy perceived as female. Among other things, *śakti* is related to the paradigm of the *pativratā* (from Sanskrit *pati*, "Lord," and *vrata*, "vow") or the virtuous wife devoted to her husband. On the one hand, a woman is regarded as over-sexualized and potentially dangerous before giving birth, and thus in need of male control. On the other hand, she is idealized as asexual being when she becomes a mother. As a virtuous and dutiful wife devoted to her husband through service, she is supposed to be subordinate and subservient, i.e. be modest, soft-spoken and obedient, and/or is praised for self-denial and maternal sacrifice. Interestingly and paradoxically, these traditional virtues are not always only to her detriment, given that by being an exemplary *pativratā*, a woman is said to be able to increase her *śakti* (Egnor 1980). She then becomes a *sumaṅgalī*, (lit., "she who is auspicious") and is considered extremely

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[15] In *Hindutva* ideology, women are, among other things, ideally perceived as "political mothers, wives, and householders" (Hellman 1999: 17). My translation.

powerful. I will have the opportunity to come back to that issue in Chapter VI.

## 5. The Field: Seventy female gurus and four representatives

The present study is based on my observations of seventy Indian female gurus' lives and mission. Whereas most of them reside in India permanently, a few live in Western countries. Despite the fact that my research was conducted at a time when Internet and other media make investigations much easier than in past decades, it took me no less than ten years to identify and localize seventy contemporary female spiritual masters. That means that a great majority of contemporary female gurus, though relatively numerous, are still well-hidden and therefore unknown to most people. Given the explosive development of media as a means of communication during the past decade, an increasing number of women are now making their existence known to a broader public through newly started websites, suggesting that more women are still to be "discovered" in the near future.

In the course of traveling in India to research this thesis, I heard about, for me, totally unknown female gurus from local people, in nearly every new place I visited. However, owing to lack of time, I did not always have the opportunity to investigate if these women suited my research questions and, as such, could be included in my material. Consequently, I do not claim that the gurus explored in the present study represent the entire phenomenon – these seventy women should be considered the tip of an iceberg rather than an exhaustive mapping out of the phenomenon. Whereas most of the gurus studied in this thesis are still living, I have also taken into consideration some of those who have passed away. Women such as Anandamayi Ma (1896–1982) and Sharada Devi (1853–1920) from West Bengal are so well known in India, and have had such an impact on contemporary Indian spirituality, that it is impossible to exclude them from my study. Throughout my text, and with only a few exceptions, all examples are taken from my sample of the seventy gurus listed at the end of the present monograph. I want to stress the fact that for practical reasons, the seventy gurus have not all been given equal attention, nor

have they been dealt with in detail as are the four examples presented in the next section.

Whereas it would be interesting to investigate the proportion of female gurus compared with male ones in contemporary Indian spirituality, such an investigation is beyond the scope of the present study. The only statistics available so far are based on studies of Hindu ascetics. Statistics from 1992 estimate that less than ten percent of the entire ascetic population of Varanasi consists of female *sādhvīs* or *sannyāsinīs* (Gross 1992: 141). That information is in line with the French anthropologist Catherine Clémentin-Ojha, claiming that the proportion of female/male ascetics in Varanasi in the seventies consisted of "one woman for every ten to twelve men" (Clémentin-Ojha 1988: 34).[16]

When I started this study, I believed that it would focus upon women fighting for their calling against relatives, neighbors, and religious authorities. I had in mind accounts of medieval and post-medieval female saints (*sant*) such as Mīrābāī, Baīnābāī, Lalleśvarī and Akkamahādēvi whose calling conflicted with their social duties, and was therefore expecting to find stories of hardship, struggle, and resistance against a hostile world.[17] With only one exception,[18] this scenario did not prove to be correct and I soon became aware that the occurrence of saints failing to be recognized and being persecuted, a common medieval theme, was a product of the ideals of sainthood and hagiographical genre of the times. I also realized how my expectations were colored by the prevailing male ideals in Indian culture, as well as by colonial expectations of female subordination.

[16] cf S. Sinha and B. Saraswati, *Ascetics of Kasi: an Anthropological Exploration*, Varanasi 1978. See also Lynn Teskey Denton who states that "One-tenth of Varanasi's 1,300 ascetics are women and girls" (Teskey Denton 1991: 212). Interestingly, at the *Millenium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders*, organized by the United Nations in New York 2000, prominent religious and spiritual leaders from all over the world and all traditions older than one hundred years old were chosen to participate. Out of two thousand religious leaders who participated in the summit, only fifteen percent were women.
http://www.gpiw.org/news_geneva.html

[17] See, for example, A. K. Ramanujan, "On Women Saints" in *The Divine Consort: Rādhā and the Goddesses of India*, John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff (eds.), Delhi 1995 (1984), 316–324.

[18] The only exception is Amritanandamayi from Kerala, partially portrayed in this study.

## 6. My four examples

I have chosen to introduce this thesis with four portraits of female gurus: Madhobi Ma (b. 1954) from Delhi, Anandmurti Gurumaa (b. 1966) from Haryana, Sai Rajarajeshwari (b. 1947) from Karnataka, and Shakti Devi (b. 1953) from Tamil Nadu. Besides examples taken from my sample of seventy women, I will, when relevant, refer more specifically to these four gurus in each chapter. However, I do not consider the four gurus to be representative of all the seventy women studied. They simply serve as illustrations for my arguments. By providing a more detailed and narrow perspective than the study of all seventy can give, my purpose is to make the phenomenon of guruhood more tangible to the reader. Accordingly, and when nothing else is explicitly said, the general statements and findings made throughout the present study always apply to all seventy.

While Madhobi Ma, Anandmurti Gurumaa, Sai Rajarajeshwari, and Shakti Devi differ from each others in some respects, mainly in terms of spiritual orientation, birthplace context, and marital status, they also share common traits. Common to all of them is that they are well educated and come from an urban environment. Among the four women portrayed in Chapter II, two are from southern India and two from northern India. While Madhobi Ma has been initiated into a *śākta* tradition, the three other gurus stand outside formal traditions. Madhobi Ma and Sai Rajarajeshwari are married, Shakti Devi is divorced and remarried, and Anandmurti Gurumaa is celibate. Whereas Sai Rajarajeshwari and Madhobi Ma have devotees among westerners, Shakti Devi and Anandmurti Gurumaa have so far hardly any foreign followers.

My choice has been partly influenced by current international scholarship in the field. When I started collecting material for this study, no comprehensive scholarly publications on female guruhood were, as far as I was aware, available. As mentioned above, no less than three significant studies were, however, published in the United States in 2004. At that time, some of the gurus presented in Karen Pechilis's anthology were also part of my own study. After reading her book, I decided to rework some parts of my thesis in order to include less accessible and, at least for many westerners, less well-known fe-

male spiritual masters. The four women portrayed in Chapter II have so far not been presented in any more extensive scholarly studies.[19]

The second reason for my choice has to do with the availability of the material, be it scholarly sources or the material collected in the field. While Madhobi Ma's portrayal is principally based on two interviews, fieldwork notes, and hagiographical accounts, Shakti Devi's account is based on three weeks of daily interaction with her in February 2004 and February 2006, as well as on e-mail correspondence. Sai Rajarajeshwari's portrait is based on hagiographical stories, on one interview with a follower, and on fieldwork notes. The report on Anandmurti Gurumaa relies on one interview, several books written by the guru herself, and fieldwork notes. I have met all the women portrayed in Chapter II and I have visited the four main *āśrams*, or homes, where each woman resides.

Besides these four gurus, I refer extensively to Amritanandamayi (1953–) from Kerala throughout my study. On this point, the reason for my choice is twofold: first, because I have had the opportunity to follow her ministry and mission since 1991 in different countries, i.e. over a longer period of time; second, given that Amritanandamayi distinguishes herself *significantly* from the other female gurus included in the present study in terms of social background (education, *varṇa*) as well as in popularity, her case provides opportunities for interesting comparisons and comments.

## 7. The material

In the present thesis, I draw on various sources. One important source of information consists of written accounts in English. These include hagiographical and biographical accounts, collections of testimonials of devotees, a few disciples' published accounts of their spiritual journeys, and quotes from gurus written principally during their lifetimes. Another significant source of information is transcriptions of religious gatherings (*satsaṅgs*) and of question-and-answer sessions taking place between disciples and guru, written down in English, French, and occasionally Swedish by devotees.

[19] With the exception of Madhobi Ma, whose life and mission have been examined in one scholarly article by Madhu Khanna. See bibliography, 2002b.

Most biographical and hagiographical data, as well as transcriptions of religious gatherings and question-and-answer sessions, collected from all corners of India, and primarily in *āśrams*, display a great diversity of literary genre. While a few are expository and well researched, most are distinguished by their pious character. A few texts were found in remote villages, sometimes abandoned and forgotten after the guru's death. Not unusually mouse or dog-bitten, these were excavated by devotees from cardboard boxes and dusty shelves for my sake. It also happened a few times that old hagiographies proved to be out of print, but thanks to helpful followers, I always managed to be provided with photocopies of the texts. A few hagiographies, new and second-hand, were bought in Western countries or ordered from different bookshops in France and Germany, or Internet bookshops in the US.

In-depth interviews, structured, semi-structured, and unstructured, constitute another important source of information for this study. Interviews with both gurus and devotees were recorded on minidisks when I was allowed to do so. I have conducted thirteen such interviews. Regarding my informants, I chose to concentrate on those I believed to be the most representative members of the traditions/movements I studied, such as close followers, long-term committed seekers, or *svāmīs*. These usually are well acquainted with the guru's life, activities, and teachings, and thus contribute reliable information. I used a basic set of key questions as a starting point for the interviews, taking up issues such as childhood, education, initiation, marriage/celibacy, teaching role as guru, and ritual purity. However, the formal interview often developed into something relatively more informal and relaxed after a while, allowing free scope for spontaneous additional questions.

I have not interviewed all the spiritual masters I have met for different reasons. The first is that not all gurus permit interviews or conversations. The aura of holiness generally surrounding spiritual masters, who are perceived as incarnations of God or as Goddesses, makes some of them relatively inaccessible. Another reason is that most gurus are very busy, feeling a strong sense of responsibility to-

wards their followers and therefore giving priority to them.[20] Another plausible reason is that because of my not being a follower, they might not believe they have anything to gain from their contact with me, and consider their interaction with me to be a waste of time. Another reason why I have not interviewed all the spiritual masters I have met is that given that many of my questions focused upon the guru's life and teachings, I found it unnecessary to inquire about facts already answered in *āśram* publications. When written material was not available, or when I wanted to make sure that published information was correct, I would however usually consult devotees.

It should be said that I did not always receive needed information, even when I was granted a private meeting with a certain spiritual master. It happened quite frequently that the private or personal details of their familial and social environment that they were willing to communicate were very scanty. A reason for this reticence might have to do with the very nature of Indian spiritual renunciation which considers people dead to their old life. Accordingly, events prior to initiation are usually erased from the memory of the renunciants or are never paid attention to. I will soon come back to that issue while discussing methodological problems.

Along with hagiographical sources, I also make use of anthropological methods such as participant observation and interviews. I participated in all the religious activities offered in various *āśrams* as a participant observer. I attempted to take part in the devotees' lives as much as possible, following the ritual schedule, attending religious gatherings (*satsaṅgs*), and participating in *seva* activities (selfless service) such as peeling and chopping vegetables. *Seva* participation gave me a unique opportunity to speak with different people in a relaxed and informal way and was therefore a rich source of information. Sometimes I took notes immediately, while the informants provided me with relevant details for my study. Other times, I had to rely upon my memory and write down what I had just been told in a spontaneous conversation, or experienced when participating in a *satsaṅg*, later

[20] Discussion with Ragini P. Shah, PhD student in Sociology in Vadodara (Gujarat), field notes, 20.11.2001.

on when I came back to my room. Information gathered as participant observer is collected as field notes in diaries.[21]

Sanskrit texts translated into English are sometimes referred to and even quoted in this study. Some of these texts have been especially useful to me in order to identifying some of my gurus' religious affiliation or to get an idea of their religious orientation. Whereas most gurus do not consider themselves part of a specific or formal religious tradition, an examination of the texts recited or chanted in different *āśrams* was revealing in terms of their religious orientation. This was particularly obvious when meeting the users of *śākta* texts, such as the Devīmāhātmyam and Lalitāsahasranāma frequently chanted in South India.

Another important source for examining and interpreting my material is scholarly literature. I make wide use of scholarly sources in order to develop theories and research questions. Moreover, scholarly literature has helped me in my efforts to present a historical background of the female guru phenomenon, as well as providing an inventory of concepts, values, and paradigms which are part of the Indian sociocultural and socioreligious context.

Information from websites, pamphlets, letters, and e-mail correspondence with gurus and followers are also used in the present study. Given the fact that websites might close down and disappear from the Internet at any time, I have collected printed copies of all material used in this thesis, and these are kept in the archive of the *Department of Comparative Religion and Folkloristics*, Åbo Akademi University. I have also taken photographs of gurus, devotees, ritual performances, and altar deities, to help me to remember various details. Examining these pictures, as well as the texts recited or chanted in *āśrams*, proved to be useful when trying to make sense of some gurus' religious orientation.

As help for the reader, a glossary of Sanskrit words has been included at the end of the thesis. Throughout the text, most terms in Sanskrit or Hindi occur transliterated with diacritical marks and italicization. All the gurus' names such as "Gurumaa" or "Sathya Sai Baba" appear without diacritics and follow the spelling praxis used by

[21] Copies of these field notes are kept in the archive of the *Department of Comparative Religion and Folkloristics*, Åbo Akademi University (Finland).

the gurus and followers. All names of Sanskrit texts also appear with diacritical marks but without italicization. Place-names, river-names, mountain-names etc. appear in their Anglicized form, without italicization. Terms such as "yoga", "guru", "mantra", or "karma" which have been naturalized into English, appear in Sanskrit without italicization, while others appear in Hindi with italicization, e.g. *darśan*, thereby following English conventions of writing. Other terms such as *āśram* occur in Sanskrit as *āśrama*, for example when referring to the Vedic "institution" of the so-called "stages of life"; [22] in Hindi as *āśram* when referring to today's so-called spiritual "hermitage" or "dwelling" where gurus reside, thus following the established praxis; and in its Anglicized form as "ashram" without italicization when the term is included in the name of the gurus' own religious organizations. Moreover, the term *āśram* occurs without italicization in most quotations.

Whereas the names of medieval female saints such as Mīrābāī, Akkamahādēvi, and Āṇṭāḷ occur with diacritical marks, thus following scholarly praxis, the names of the contemporary gurus and informants occur in their Anglicized form and without italicization according to the gurus and devotees' spelling. Titles of transliterated hagiographies follow the publisher's spelling and appear sometimes with diacritical marks, sometimes not, and with italicization. In most cases, I have also excluded terms of address and/or deference such as "Mataji," "Amma," "Shree," "Srimad," or "Bhagavan" from the gurus' names.

## 8. Fieldwork methodology and methodological problems

My fieldwork was conducted in India during five periods of fieldwork stays totalling ten months in Nov–Dec 1999, Nov–Jan 2000-2001, Nov–Dec 2001, Feb–Mars 2004 and Jan–Feb 2006. I did not conduct classical fieldwork, staying in one place but instead dedicated myself to so-called translocal/multilocal and transnational fieldwork (Hannerz 2001).[23] I have traveled all over India in most of the federal states

[22] More information on these "stages of life" (*varṇāśrama*) can be found in Chapter VI.

[23] According to Hannerz, in a bilocal study, two fields are investigated; in a multilocal study, several fields are investigated; in a translocal study, several fields interacting with each other are investigated (Hannerz 2001).

of the country, visiting large cities, small cities, and villages. I have also undertaken one trip to the United States, and one to Germany. During these travels, I have had the opportunity to meet sixteen living gurus and to visit the *āśrams* of ten either absent or departed ones.[24] The language used to communicate was English and occasionally French. I always met people willing to help me with translations from Hindi, Marathi, Bengali, Malayalam, Kannada, and Tamil when needed. My informants were predominantly well educated and well versed in the English language, and most of them had a relationship with the guru as either close disciples and/or personal attendants.

In the course of researching this thesis, and with only a few exceptions, I usually stayed about one week at each place. The disadvantages entailed by visits of such a short duration were however largely compensated by the benefits I received from the different socioreligious environments I encountered. Observations from various Indian federal states provided multiple opportunities for reflection and comparison, among other things, in terms of insights into the religious orientations and spiritual practices embraced by the gurus.

When I was given the opportunity to do so, I chose to stay in *āśrams*, and when not, I stayed in guest houses. However, I always found the former solution more beneficial, given that staying close to one's research area is less time wasting than the latter alternative. Moreover, the spiritual environment of the *āśrams* and the people that I met there gave me more opportunities to observe and study ongoing interactions than if I had stayed anywhere else. Sometimes I stayed in *āśrams* in the same way as devotees do, as for example at Amritanandamayi's *āśram*. This means that I paid a fee for food and lodging like anyone else, shared my bedroom or dormitory with other people, took my meals in the dining hall, and was supposed to follow the religious schedule of the *āśram*. Other times, I was the guru's guest, and as such, I was given special treatment, usually provided with my own bedroom situated near the guru's room or apartment, and was granted a special attendant to care for my needs, such as bringing food and tea to my room. That special treatment also gave me the opportunity to get access to the guru and be in her presence more informally, extensively, and freely than what most followers usually do.

[24] A list of the *āśrams* I visited has been included at the end of the thesis.

This was particularly the case when visiting Mate Mahadevi in Bangalore (Karnataka), Shakti Devi in Tamil Nadu, and Indira Betiji in Vadodara (Gujarat).

People often ask me how I was able to find the gurus of my study. Given the fact that unlike Christian or Buddhist monastic institutions, Hindu *āśrams* are not centrally organized, being eager to maintain autonomy and freedom, the process of identifying and locating seventy female gurus often looked like a job for a detective which might partly explain why it took almost ten years to complete. As mentioned before, I came on the track of a few gurus through various articles and monographs found in scholarly as well as popular literature. When the conditions were most favorable, it happened that I found information in one article/monograph portraying a single guru. Other times, I could find a single guru mentioned by name in passing in a text, a footnote, or in some lines in a paragraph. From this starting-point began the sometimes arduous work of trying to localize that person. I started contacting the writers, by postal letters during the first years of my research, eventually mostly by e-mail. Getting answers from scholars or authors was not always a quick process. Weeks or even months were sometimes required to get as much as a single address, an absolute necessity to be able to find gurus in India. It also happened quite frequently that I did not get any answer at all.

The second way of finding out about female gurus was through my interaction with people, and through media, in Sweden where I live. A few Indian gurus have formal or informal centers in Sweden, with regular spiritual gatherings (*satsaṅgs*), and followers advertise these *satsaṅgs* in newspapers, magazines, and through posters. Moreover, one of these female gurus, Mata Amritanandamayi, has visited the country several times. Furthermore, surfing on the Internet helped me a lot. Here I have modern technology to thank for having made possible what only a decade ago would have been unimaginable. I was able to find a significant number of persons that way and more particularly the four main personages of the present study, Madhobi Ma, Sai Rajarajeshwari, Shakti Devi and Anandmurti Gurumaa. The last source of information involved meeting strangers in trains, hotels, shops, streets, temples, and *āśrams*, while traveling in India. Most of the Indian people I met showed great interest in my research, being impressed by my attempting such a "huge" undertaking, and proud

of the fact that a Western woman chose to come all the way from Sweden to *their* country and take time to investigate *their* religion. They were thus willing to help me as much as they could, and provided me with a great deal of valuable information.

Something should also be said about the fieldwork conditions in India. While I have great sympathy and respect for Indian culture and Indian people in general, the conditions of living and working there are often, to say the least, challenging for a non-Indian born person. The heat, long and uncomfortable journeys in shaking, long-distance buses, and overcrowded trains are extremely exhausting. Another challenge is the cooperation with people. Whereas people are extremely kind and hospitable in general, it was my experience that qualities such as efficiency, discipline, and privacy were not emphasized to the degree that I expected. This means that appointments were often cancelled, and conversations constantly interrupted by phone calls and/or the coming and going of people.

Interviewing gurus is quite another story. With only a few exceptions, I was never invited to conduct a regular interview, sitting on a chair and conversing in private with the guru in a room, despite repeated requests from my side. Instead, all interaction with gurus took place in public areas, mostly in temples and *āśrams*, and most interviews were conducted outside, at the so-called *darśans*. As one of my Indian informants explained, the reason why interviews were not conducted in privacy is that the notion of privacy tends to disappear in guru-related contexts. As spiritual leaders, gurus are primarily considered public figures, expected to meet the need of their followers at any time.[25] Given that the occasion of *darśan* is central in Hindu religiosity, I will say some words about that practice.

## 8.1 The practice of *darśan*

The practice of *darśan*, which has no full equivalent in Western religious activity or conduct, is a broadly established Hindu religious institution in which believers meet a deity (Bharati 1970a: 161).[26] The deity might be either a *mūrti* or "form" of the deity pictured as anth-

[25] Discussion with Ragini P. Shah, PhD student in Sociology in Vadodara (Gurajat), field notes, 20.11.2001.

[26] For a more detailed definition of *darśan* and its different expressions and meanings, see Diana Eck's monograph (1995).

ropomorphic, aniconic, such as *śivaliṅgam* or *śālagrāma* representing Śiva/Viṣṇu, or a living person. The etymology of the word *darśan* comes from the Sanskrit root *dṛś-*, "to see" and it is sometimes translated as "auspicious sight" (Eck 1996: 1). From the point of view of religious practitioners, the practice of *darśan* is regarded as a privileged instant of mutual communication and religious communion through the eyes, where the seeker "sees" the deity, and is "seen" back by him/her, in order to be granted the deity's blessings (Eck 1996: 1).

According to the standard procedure of *darśan*, one should come to a guru dressed in an appropriate way (sari or *pañjābī* for women) and take one's shoes off. Given that one should not come empty-handed to a guru, one should approach him/her with some offering (*dakṣiṇā*), usually gift of fruit or money, but also incense, sweets, or other status symbols such as saris and jewelry. One then prostrates at the guru's feet as a mark of respect and receives a part of the offering back as *prasād*. I always behaved as I was expected to (i.e. according to the disciples' expectations), thus following the proper etiquette. Though my identity as a research student and the purpose of my visit were always extremely clear to everybody from the very beginning, my behavior scarcely differed from the followers I met in that respect.

Sometimes I felt differently treated than others and that special attention was accorded to me as a westerner and research student. That was the case when I was successful in obtaining an appointment for private *darśans*, thus giving me the opportunity to ask questions or speak directly to the guru, or when I was the guru's guest.[27] In other circumstances, I felt treated like anybody else, and more specifically, like a disciple being tested.[28] This was especially evident in a particular *vaiṣṇava* community in North India where the guru hardly ever looked at me and did not speak to me during a ten-day period of daily visits. My attempts to get close to her failed, despite the fact that the number of devotees visiting her was few at that time, and that she did

[27] Worth mentioning is that even during these private *darśans*, I was never alone. A few other "guests" were always present, given the fact that being invited by a *guru* on such occasions is considered a privilege.

[28] cf. Yogananda 1997: "India's unwritten law for the truth seeker is patience; a master may purposely make a test of one's eagerness to meet him," p. 49.

not seem particularly busy. I remember the immense relief I felt at the end of the stay when she finally granted me a smile!

In order to illustrate what fieldwork conditions with Indian gurus might be like, I would like to say a few words about my first encounter with Sai Rajarajeshwari who will receive more ample attention in Chapter II. The first time I made contact with her was by e-mail, and after presenting my research project for her, I expressed my wish to meet her in India. She answered nearly at once through one of her close followers and I was given an appointment for an interview. However, my visit to India was cancelled and when I contacted her a year later with the same purpose, there was no reply in spite of my repeated attempts to make contact.

Disregarding that absence of reply, I went anyway to Mysore (Karnataka) where Sai Rajarajeshwari lives and made a call at her house. A devotee answered and suggested that I visit her *āśram* in Karekura, a village situated about thirty kilometers outside Mysore. I was there already the next morning after a half-hour bus trip, and was welcomed by an extremely friendly *brāhmaṇa* priest who showed me the temple and invited me to stay for lunch. When I was finished at two p.m., I was told that Sai Rajarajeshwari intended to visit the *āśram* at six p.m. that very evening. Given that only four hours remained before her visit in Karekura, one of the young men working in the kitchen suggested that he could call in order to inquire if I could stay at the *āśram* and wait there for the evening program. However, Sai Rajarajeshwari declined my request. I was told instead to go back to Mysore and to come back to Karekura for the evening program with a taxi. While I was silently thinking that going back to Mysore was a waste of time, energy, and money, the young man insisted that I come back with the standard answer: "Not all people are allowed to come, you are very fortunate!"[29]

Having no other option than leaving, I went back to Mysore and took a taxi back to Karekura that evening as I had been requested. I participated in the evening program together with around fifteen people while my taxi waited for me outside the temple. After the concluding *pūjā*, Sai Rajarajeshwari asked a few people to approach her and gave them *vibhūti* (holy ash) as a gift. While she joked and spoke

[29] Field notes, Mysore (Karnataka), 31.1.2006.

in a friendly way to most of them, she did not address me even a single time, and I left with the feeling of not having received what I expected from my visit.

The next morning, at the suggestion of the *brāhmaṇa* priest in Karekura I had met the previous day, I took a rickshaw to Sai Rajarajeshwari's residence in Mysore in order to buy a hagiography of her life. I was received by Maitreyi, a twenty-two-year-old woman in charge of the bookshop situated in a little house attached to the guru's house. I bought books and photographs, was offered tea, and during the time I spent in the bookshop, Maitreyi was constantly looking through the door opening in order to see if her guru had a message for her or for me. After one and a half hours, when I was at the point of leaving, Maitreyi was called to Sai Rajarajeshwari's house. When she came back, she told me: "Amma wants you to come for *darśan* to Karekura this evening. She says that she will speak to you."[30]

Such examples illustrate how some gurus might behave and treat people around them. Worshiped by followers with utmost reverence as an embodiment of the divine, and being part of a highly hierarchical society, they are used to being met with complete and unquestioning obedience as an act of surrender from faithful followers.[31] In the believers' eyes, the unpredictability of the gurus' behavior is often interpreted as *līlā* or "play," a term used in goddess contexts, thus reinforcing the authority and credibility of the gurus' divine character.[32] Somebody told me that given that Sai Rajarajeshwari is omniscient, she always responds exactly to the needs of the people she meets, knowing what has to be done in every single situation. However, for my part, exhausted by new impressions, the South Indian heat, a bad cold, and the goddess' *līlā*, I stayed in Mysore and went to bed early that night, feeling slightly annoyed over my inauspicious karma!

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[30] Field notes, Mysore (Karnataka), 2.2.2006.

[31] See for example Måns Broo, where a male *guru* is compared to a king or feudal Lord and the practice of *darśan* is said to have its origins in court-etiquette (Broo 2003: 189–190).

[32] *Līlā* was practiced by the Indian revivalist and mystic Caitanya (1486–1533). The concept of *līlā* which has its origins in the *vaiṣṇava* tradition refers to the love-play between Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa (Lassell Hallstrom 1999: 165).

## 8.2 The constraints of the research

Something should also be said about the constraints of my research. I guess that the fact that most female spiritual masters were found either through websites, through the gurus' visits to western countries, or through my contact with Indian people when traveling in India has influenced the selection of the seventy gurus in this study. Setting up websites requires computer knowledge hardly available to poor people, and visiting foreign countries requires financial resources well above what most Indian people can afford. Moreover, my background as a well-educated, English speaking westerner and the fact that I do not speak any Indian languages entailed that most of the Indian people I interacted with in buses, trains, and guest houses were basically well educated, English speaking, middle-class, and males; i.e. they belonged to the privileged strata of Indian society. While I was not aware of the impact of such circumstances when I started researching this study, I eventually realized that this has given me the opportunity to get in touch with far more privileged female gurus than I otherwise would have done. Hence, my selection of female gurus is somewhat distorted.

Besides the middle-class character of my material, I am also aware that the relatively restricted number of female gurus examined in the present thesis entails that I ought to be cautious in terms of generalizations. While most of my observations include a majority of the seventy women under study, they do not include all of them. Nor do they include all known and, to me, unknown Indian gurus of today who are not part of my selection.

Hence, I am well aware that there might exist a very diverse religious field beyond the horizons of this thesis that would be of further relevance for understanding the phenomenon of female guruhood in general terms. For example, it could be interesting to investigate if female guruhood can be found in other strata of Indian society, and what differences could be found between such a potential group and the seventy women of my sample. I wish once again to emphasize that this study does not claim to provide an exhaustive picture of Indian female gurus in contemporary Hinduism, but one of several possible accounts of this vast field. Therefore, the present thesis is the product of its own limitations embedded in methodological and theoretical

choices and challenges, as well as in the material that has been available.

## 8.3 Textual studies and the anthropology of religion

In the course of researching the present study, I came across methodological problems of several kinds. As mentioned previously, finding, identifying, and localizing almost seventy women was an arduous task taking almost ten years. Moreover, pursuing translocal research in a large country like India is a time-consuming process. Another difficulty has to do with the presentation of such a huge body of material, and more specifically, with the relationship between the particular and the general. How does one do full justice to women's individual experiences when looking for general patterns fitting most of them?

One major methodological problem I encountered while writing this thesis is related to the clash between textual, indological knowledge on women and how things appeared to be "in reality" when I was in the field. Although *Religionswissenschaft* has had the ambition to approach all religious expressions of humankind equally, to avoid privileging certain forms of religiosity, scholars of gender studies have rightly pointed out that it came to support almost exclusively masculine ways of thinking, thus failing to take into consideration the religious expressions of females. Until recently, it was predominantly men who were part of the literate stratum of Indian society. Men studied texts, commented on texts, and wrote texts from the male point of view, i.e. expressing male concerns (Kinsley 2002: 5). Whereas most literate women chose to express their experiences in vernacular languages, learned males or *paṇḍits* made use of Sanskrit, the prestigious language of sacred texts and male *brāhmaṇs*.

According to Rita Gross, one thing that has significantly transformed our perceptions of Indian religions is the emergence of feminist anthropology of religion in South Asian studies. She states that putting the emphasis on lived religion rather than on religion as expressed in textual studies has contributed to a reassessment of our views. Gross claims that the models and theories based solely on elite texts have distorted the understanding of India among westerners, thus eclipsing women in religious contexts. Accordingly, she suggests

that women's religious lives cannot be approached only through textual studies but also have to be researched through the methods of the anthropology of religion (Gross 2002: 59).

Postcolonial scholars such as S.N. Balagangadhara, Romila Thapar, and Tripathi claim that this distortion has its origins in nineteenth-century Western discourse. According to them, such a distortion was generated by an overemphasizing of textual sources by colonial administrators, Orientalists, and British scholars, who wanted to provide a monolithic picture of Indian society as "static, timeless and spaceless, and dominated by the Brahmans as guardians of the sacred order of society" (Van der Veer 1997: 153). A consequence of that emphasis is that Indian religion is characterized as having a monolithic, monotheist, and "otherworldly" outlook, and still tends to be confined to Hindu philosophy (Thapar 1997: 55; Tripathi 1997: 124–125).

As Tripathi understands it, that otherworldly character of Hinduism was generated by an overemphasizing of *advaita vedānta* philosophy in the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century by Theosophists and religious preachers such as Vivekananda (Tripathi 1997: 125). According to Balagangadhara, one reason why Western scholars eventually adopted such a monolithic approach is that they wanted to present Hinduism as a unified religion, modeled upon Christianity. In order to bring unity to what appeared to be diverse, he claims, nineteenth-century Western scholars started identifying the *brāhmaṇas* with the clergy or priests of Hinduism, and the Vedas with "holy books" whose authority must have sanctioned the social organization resting on the *varṇāśrama* system (Balagangadhara 1994: 112–114; 120).

Such a focus upon the ideals of a *brāhmaṇa* male elite by the compilers of scriptural sources on the one hand, and by Western scholars on the other hand, has since colored definitions and descriptions of Indian religious traditions, creating, among other things, classificatory problems (Balagangadhara 1994: 281–286). In Chapters V and VI, I encountered problems of definition, classification, and interpretation in attempting to organize and understand my material. These difficulties revolve primarily around the nature of Indian asceticism, and more specifically around issues of religious affiliation, initiation, lineage, transmission of spiritual authority, and the relationship of asceticism to marital status.

## 8.4 Hagiographical sources

Another difficulty of researching the present study which is intimately associated with the very essence of renunciation is related to the life-stories of spiritual masters preceding initiation. Through initiation, the believer chooses to renounce his or her previous life and social ties and is supposed to rub away the past from his or her consciousness. He or she is supposed to give up the boundaries of the limited mind such as identification with the material world, which is part of cultural conditioning, in order to get access to unlimited, spacious, and unbounded consciousness or inner freedom which, according to Indian beliefs, is understood as the essence of mankind's true nature.

Renunciation par excellence is reflected in the traditional initiation of *sannyāsa* where the spiritual adept symbolically dies to his or her old life through the completion of funeral ceremonies for herself and ancestors (*śrāddha*). During the ceremony, he or she utters the words, "None belongs to me, to none do I belong," and receives a set of ochre-dyed clothes and a new name in order to be reborn with a new identity (Teskey Denton 2004: 94). That symbolic death implies that all the so-called historical facts from one's early years such as personal information regarding familial and social background are disregarded.[33] Accordingly, the accounts of the gurus' life-stories which are available are often nothing but a reconstruction of events collected by the followers in different hagiographies.

Hagiographies, or "studies of the saints" (from the Greek hagios, "saint" and graphein, "to write"),[34] also called "sacred biographies," have been at the center of previous scholarship. "Sacred biographies" refers to those accounts written by the followers and devotees of a religious founder, and belong to a particular literary genre using a specific religious language. As Thomas Heffernan puts it, the primary social function of hagiographies is not to reflect aesthetic abilities, but

[33] Another reason for not being willing to divulge one's own background is quoted in an article written by David M. Miller. He mentions that in a foreword to *The Autobiography of Swami Sivananda*, *svāmī* Sadananda Saraswati states that the well-known male *guru svāmī* Shivananda consistently refused to reveal facts about his life if they were not "directly beneficial for spiritual progress of the reader" (Miller 1995: 89).

[34] *Petit Larousse Illustré 1984*, p. 482. Although the term "hagiography" is primarily found in Christian contexts, I will make use of it throughout my study.

to serve a didactic purpose: "to teach (*docere*) the truth of the faith through the principle of individual example" (Heffernan 1992: 19). One significant component involved in the hagiographical process revolves around the relationship between the author and the audience, where authorship is downplayed in order to reflect the spirit of a collective narrative.

According to Reynolds and Capps, the problem with hagiographies is that they do not give "true" information, but are "constituted by an intricate interweaving of mythic, paradigmatic, and historical elements" traditionally belonging to different fields (Reynolds and Capps 1976: 28). Contrary to biographical texts, which try to render the record of an individual life according to historical facts, thus providing a narrative portrait that is as accurate as possible, hagiographies look more like historical fiction, based on mythological events glorifying a human being in order to establish a "mythical ideal" (Reynolds and Capps 1976: 3). They reflect the received tradition, presenting a set of religious ideals in accordance with the moral and religious standard of holiness in a given time and context, a tradition constantly changing and reinterpreting anew (Heffernan 1992: 19).

Hagiographical accounts usually focus upon a few key events such as an extraordinary birth, odd behavior of inexplicable piety in childhood and adolescence, spiritual initiation through dreams, disregard for social conventions, displays of trancelike states of consciousness, survival without food or water, the ability to perform miracles, and an unusual death. In other words, the historical person in focus becomes a living legend. Moreover, what makes hagiographical accounts so special is that they "both recount the process through which a new religious ideal is established and, at the same time, participate in that process" (Reynolds and Capps 1976: 3). This entails that, most of the time, the historical reliability of hagiographies is highly questionable (Miller 1995: 88–89).

Reynolds and Capps claim that there are two kinds of hagiographies: those which spiritualize holy persons and those which humanize them. Moreover, whereas sacred biographies focusing upon founders "intend to depict a distinctively new religious image or ideal," hagiographers portraying minor religious figures present their subject as "one who has realized […] an image, ideal, or attainment already recognized by his religious community" (Reynolds and Capps

1976: 4). In the first case, there is not as much concern for the holy person's life-story in terms of chronology as there is for portraying a new religious pioneer, innovator, and visionary, by highlighting exceptional and unique virtues or attainments. In the second case, it is more a matter of reporting chronological events and creating "a narrative portrait or 'likeness' of the subject" (Reynolds and Capps 1976: 5). As far as the present study is concerned, I believe that both kinds of narrative are present among the hagiographies available to me, and that these two genres are not always neatly separated but overlap each other.

An examination of the contemporary hagiographical accounts depicting the lives of some of the women in the present study is particularly interesting in terms of reliability. Whereas a large number of hagiographies produced in most world religions were written in past centuries, most of the gurus of my study are active today, and the compilation of their sacred biographies is taking place right now, during their own lifetime. Hence, gurus have, at least theoretically, the possibility to either confirm or deny some of the fantastic details outlined in the accounts of their lives. However, while researching this thesis, I came across female gurus who claimed that what we would call "fictional" events had actually occurred in their lives. Confronted with the impossibility of placing the blame on remote hagiographers from past medieval times, dismissing them for having an overly vivid imagination, the question is how we can understand such "inconsistencies."

Not only the genre conventions of hagiographies are problematic; previous research has shown that the gender of the person sketching the account influences the content of the story. In a comparative study of Christian hagiographies written by male and female biographers in medieval Europe, Caroline Walker Bynum shows that male biographers tend to project their own expectations onto women's biographies. Kathryn R. Blackstone comments on Bynum's study as follows: "When women write their own biographies, a major theme is continuity with their own social, biological, and psychological experiences as women. When men write women's stories (even in situations where autobiographies are extant), the themes are crises and their resolution, liminality, and dramatic symbolic gender reversals. Likewise, male biographers describe women as weak more than women do, and as-

sume that women's religious experiences require verification by their adoption of masculine qualities – an assumption not found in biographies written by women" (Blackstone 2000: 115).

This statement is echoed by the contributors to the anthology *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and their Interpreters* which explores the hagiographies of female Christian saints (Mooney 1999). In that study, attempts are made to disentangle the voices of medieval female saints in Europe from those of their hagiographers, and show how the self-portrayals of female saints diverge from those presented by followers and admirers. Christian hagiographical texts were predominantly authored not only by men, but by the male clerical elite. The contributors' main argument is that these male-authored representations of female saints reveal far more about men's idealized conceptions of women than about female saints' self-representations. As such, we can see that male descriptions are the product of religious stereotypes based on specific expectations.

Mooney's investigation of female saints in medieval accounts indicates that the women tended to be depicted as more mystical, other-worldly, and mysterious, and as being less assertive and active in their religious roles, than they were in reality. Moreover, the nuptial imagery depicting women's relationship with the divine was strongly emphasized (Mooney 1999: 10–12). According to Karen Scott, Catherine of Siena was, for example, silent about her mystical experiences and therefore never portrayed herself as an extraordinary person, but instead as an ordinary one. She did not claim to be enlightened, but believed herself to be just a simple disciple on the path to God. However, her highly educated confessor and main hagiographer, the prominent theologian Raymond of Capua, focused upon her paranormal experiences and visions. Karen Scott states that the reason for the diverging pictures is that Catherine's and Raymond's accounts have different purposes. As Catherine regarded her mission primarily to be one of a peacemaker and religious reformer, her voluminous dictated correspondence with different people contains mainly doctrinal and practical instructions, aiming to serve as spiritual guidance. Raymond's purpose, on the other hand, as a follower and admirer of Catherine of Siena, was to give spiritual legitimacy to her thoughts, behavior, and actions in order to prove her sanctity (Scott 1999).

It should be said that whereas historians of religion have sometimes avoided the hagiographical genre because of its lack of documentary evidence that could reflect any "reality," it is now acknowledged by many that no text can give us a better picture of the mentality of a specific cultural context than the life of a saint. Besides historical facts about the gurus' lives, I will make use of hagiographical sources throughout the present study, and more particularly in Chapter IV which focuses upon women's growth into spirituality through childhood and adolescence.

## 9. Confidentiality

Whereas hagiographical accounts, biographies and other printed material published by gurus are freely available in most *āśrams* and places of spiritual gathering, and most of the interviews were not conducted in privacy, it sometimes happened that spontaneous conversations took place between the guru and me when we were alone, especially when I was the guru's guest. Quite frequently, this interaction revealed more private information than what was discussed in interviews. This was particularly the case with Shakti Devi from Tamil Nadu, who is portrayed in Chapter II. I stayed at her house for three weeks, and over time, she came to consider me as a friend, obviously happy to have the opportunity to communicate with someone who shared her spiritual interests. My position as a woman, foreigner, and outsider in her religious community, allowed her to speak freely on different issues, and more specifically on the conflict she experienced between her social role as woman, wife, and mother, on the one hand, and her spiritual role, on the other. For that reason, I refer to her by a pseudonym. Moreover, some details of her life-story which might reveal her identity have been changed in order to protect her integrity.

## 10. Expected contributions and potential relevance

The present study differs from the recent studies of female religious figures previously ignored by scholarship. First of all, while a few anthropologists have begun paying attention to the issue of female asceticism and female leadership in Hindu contexts, with a few excep-

tions, comparative approaches are still largely lacking.[35] Moreover, whereas a few in-depth studies have been conducted on specific female gurus in articles and book-length monographs, no broad, extensive, and systematic survey and analysis of the phenomenon of female guruhood has yet been produced. One of the main reasons for this lack is, as far as I am aware, that interest in women's issues in Hindu contexts is relatively new. "Women's Studies" as an academic discipline, was born in the 1980s and it was not until that time that studies focusing upon women in Hinduism started being undertaken (Sharma 2002). Moreover, I believe another reason to be that identifying and localizing such a number of gurus in different federal states of India might be regarded as too arduous and time consuming an enterprise.

One of my main contributions is the investigation of the lives and mission of seventy female spiritual masters. Through the exploration of the spiritual career of such a broad group of women from birth to childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, I believe I have acquired knowledge enough to show what the phenomenon of female guruhood looks like, and material enough to allow relevant generalizations and conclusions. I hope that my survey will convincingly demonstrate that an examination of female asceticism automatically entails a rethinking of the androcentric models of religious practices and ways of religious behavior which are displayed in "traditional" scholarship. Furthermore, my concern is to show that despite diverse voices in textual sources and past scholarship emphasizing women's lack of participation in religious contexts, female gurus are powerful actors in the domain of spirituality. As such, I hope that the inclusion of their voices will fill a gap and that it will contribute to widening our understanding of what is commonly labeled as "Hindu thought", i.e., men's viewpoints and ways of thinking.

## 11. Presentation of chapters

In order to provide a picture of the spiritual career of female gurus, I have chosen to focus upon women's different phases of life, and thus organize the present study chronologically. I begin with childhood, advance to adolescence, and conclude with adulthood. Categories

[35] As previously mentioned, examples of such exceptions are Pechilis's; Forsthoefel and Humes's; and Khandelwal, Hausner, and Grodzins Gold's anthologies.

such as birth, childhood, adolescence, trancelike states and illnesses, paranormal gifts, spiritual practices, enlightenment, initiation, choice of marital status, and establishment of a teaching role, all of which constitute important phases of a guru's spiritual career, are presented with running commentary. Besides my efforts to give a picture of a guru's spiritual career, the reason why I have chosen these specific categories is that they contribute to illuminating the different aspects of the women's personalities and the roles associated with them. These roles, colored by the Indian cultural and religious environment, can be enumerated as follows: women as social beings; women as spiritual teachers; women as mystics and saints; and women as manifestations of the divine, often understood by followers as goddesses and/or *avatārs*.[36]

Chapter I introduces the purpose of the study and presents the assumptions that guide the reasoning, as well as materials, theories, and methods. The materials, consisting of various types of written sources and fieldwork observations are discussed thoroughly. Chapter II presents a short historical background of the phenomenon of guruhood, followed by portraits of four female gurus. Chapters III and IV are background chapters, dealing with gurus as social and individual beings. Chapter III examines the social and sociocultural environment framing contemporary female spiritual mastery and discusses whether it has an impact on the spiritual inclinations of the gurus. Chapter IV investigates the spiritual experiences of female gurus, especially during childhood and adolescence, contrasting the patterns of holiness surrounding their lives and deeds with the uniqueness of the spiritual calling. Chapter V turns to the making of a guru, i.e., the unfolding process that leads from private religiosity to public recognition. It focuses upon religious affiliation contra charisma, and concludes with a closer examination of female leadership in relation to issues of authority and power.

Chapter VI presents the variety of ascetic models chosen by the gurus under study, with a specific focus upon "renunciatory asceticism" (*sannyāsa*), and "celibate asceticism" (*brahmacarya*) within, or outside

[36] While the Hindu tradition generally does not recognize female *avatārs*, most gurus' followers do claim that gurus are *incarnations* (*avatārs*) of the divine. Such a view is sometimes even shared by the gurus themselves.

the ties of marriage.[37] The question is asked whether tensions exist between different kinds of asceticism, as well as between the values traditionally associated with asceticism and those associated with social expectations. In Chapter VII, I turn to the issue of goddess worship in India, with a view to shedding some light on how this central trend might have influenced the religious leadership of some given contemporary female gurus. I examine how divinity finds expression in the different roles enacted by women: as *avātars* and divine mothers. One of the key issues of the chapter is whether Hindu perceptions of gurus as divine beings translate into the status of women in society. Chapter VIII revolves around issues of female agency, norms, norm-transgression, and empowerment. It asks whether women's pursuit of a spiritual career is controversial and whether it has an impact on the codes of social conformity that dictate their lives. Chapter IX summarizes the study, arguing that contemporary Indian spirituality provides women with manifold opportunities to get access to positions of spiritual leadership. I conclude by examining how female gurus' religious involvement contributes to shaping and transforming Hindu discourses and practices.

[37] The expressions "renunciatory asceticism" and "celibate asceticism" are borrowed from Lynn Teskey Denton 2004: 94.

# II – Female Gurus in Hinduism: a Historical Survey Followed by Portraits of Four Female Spiritual Masters

## 1. The paradigm of guruhood in Hindu tradition[38]

As noted in the introduction, gurus, or spiritual teachers or preceptors, have a central position in Indian religiosity. According to a common interpretation, the basic signification of the Sanskrit adjective *guru*, "heavy" or "weighty," is used to refer to a person who possesses much knowledge and thus power (Mlecko 1982: 33–34; Mahony 1997: 239). In later texts, such as the Tantric Kulārṇāva Tantra from the eleventh century CE, an esoteric explanation of the word guru is suggested. According to that interpretation, the term is said to be composed of the syllable *gu*, meaning "ignorance," and the syllable *ru*, "dispeller" (17.7). The Gurugītā, an independent text sometimes ascribed to the Skanda Purāṇa, which is recited in certain contemporary *āśrams*, puts it this way:[39]

> […] He by whose light (true knowledge) arises is known by the word "Guru." (10)[40] The syllable *gu* is darkness,and the syllable *ru* is said to be light. There is no doubt that the Guru is indeed the supreme knowledge that swallows (the darkness of) ignorance. (23)[41] The first syllable *gu* represents the principles such as *māyā,* and the second syllable *ru* the supreme knowledge that destroys the illusion of *māyā.* (24)[42]

The origins of the concept of guruhood can be found before the Common Era. The Vedas do not mention the term *guru*, but speak of

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[38] For a study of the emergence and centrality of guruhood in Indian culture, see, for example, David Miller 1976–77, Joel D. Mlecko 1982, Jan Gonda 1985 (Chapter VIII: "The Guru," 229–283); Daniel Gold 1988; André Padoux 2000.

[39] See for example the Gurugītā (182) in *The Nectar Of Chanting*, published by SYDA Foundation, South Fallburg 1992, p. 57. I have not been able to find anything like the Gurugītā in the Skanda purāṇa. The reason why the Gurugītā is said to be part of the Skanda purāṇa is probably to give authority and legitimacy to the text.

[40] *The Nectar of Chanting*, p. 10.

[41] Ibid, p. 13.

[42] Ibid, p. 14.

the *ācārya* (teacher) who is said to be "one who knows and teaches the proper mode of conduct" (Mahony 1997: 239). At that time, the role of the *ācārya* was to teach the Vedas, and the teachings had a didactic character (Mlecko 1982: 34). It was not until around the eighth century BCE that the word *guru* became a noun referring to a teacher (Mahony 1997: 239). In the Chāndogya upaniṣad (VIII.15.1) written at that time, the term *guru* appeared for the first time, and the idea of a spiritual master as transmitter of spiritual knowledge became central. A guru no longer taught primarily through formal factual instruction, but his role was to contribute to the spiritual development of the student through his own example (Mlecko 1982: 34–35; Mahony 1997: 239). The teachings, which attracted many students, focused upon the impersonal principles of *brahman* and *ātman* as ultimate reality, the *ego*, and emphasis on knowledge with its capacity to remove the *samskāras* and stop the wheel of *saṃsāra*.

Eventually, the Vedic teachers who possessed their status by virtue of scholarly knowledge or birth were replaced by gurus revered for their charismatic qualities. *Upaniṣad* texts such as Kaṭha up. and Īśa up. have a theistic character and Śvetāśvatara up. implicitly began to identify the guru with God, as the following stanza evinces: "Only in a man who has the deepest love for God, and who shows the same love toward his teacher as toward God, do these points [immortality, supreme knowledge, *brahman*] declared by the Noble One shine forth" (Śvetāśvatara up. VI. 23). In the Bhagavadgītā, theism was further emphasized in the person of Kṛṣṇa. Kṛṣṇa is acting as Arjuna's charioteer, but it is believed that beyond his human appearance, it is God or Bhagavān who reveals himself.[43] Arjuna describes Kṛṣṇa's multifaceted personality and omnipotence with a number of expressions: "The supreme Brahman, the supreme station, The supreme purifier art Thou!, The eternal divine spirit, The primal deity, the unborn lord" (Bhagavadgītā X.12); "The ancient seer, the governor, […] The establisher of all" (Bhagavadgītā VIII.9); and "the father of this world," "the mother," "the grandsire," "supporter," "witness," "friend," (Bhagavadgītā IX.17.18). While the *upaniṣads* did not recognize any spiritual savior, the Bhagavadgītā came to consider Kṛṣṇa as an incarnation of the di-

[43] "There is no end to My extent" (Bhagavadgītā X. 19), "I am the Soul" (Bhagavadgītā X. 20), "I am Viṣṇu" (Bhagavadgītā X. 21), "I am Śaṃkara (Śiva)" (Bhagavadgītā X. 23).

vine thereby introducing a new idea that came to characterize later *vaiṣṇava* theology.[44] The deification of the guru reached its peak in the Bhāgavata Puraṇa where it is claimed that the guru should be worshiped as God (Bhāgavata Puraṇa X.86; XI. 3.48).[45]

With the emergence of *tantra*, the identification of the guru with divinity was further developed and intensified, and taken for granted. It was emphasized to such an extent that over time, it became difficult to see whether the authors of the texts were referring to the guru or to the deity (Padoux 2000: 41–42). That identification is also particularly explicit in devotional texts such as the Gurugītā which is still recited in *āśrams*. Similarly to the dialogue of the *upaniṣads* in which Yajñayavalkya instructs his wife Maitreyī, the Gurugītā depicts a dialogue between Śiva and Pārvatī at Mount Kailash, in which Pārvatī asks her husband Śiva to show her the path of divine realization. The one hundred eighty-six stanzas of the text describe the nature, role, and importance of guru worship, and in one of the most well-known stanzas, we can read: "The guru is Brahmā, the guru is Viṣṇu, the guru is Lord Śiva, the guru is indeed Parabrahman. Salutations to Śrī Guru" (Gurugītā 32). Meditation on the guru's form and utterance of the guru's name are parts of the practice: "The root of meditation is the Guru's form. The root of worship is the Guru's feet. The root of mantra is the Guru's word. The root of liberation is the Guru's grace" (Gurugītā 76). The relationship between Śiva and Pārvatī serves as a model for the guru-disciple relationship.

The guru-disciple relationship is still central in Indian religiosity and considered to be a very close and intimate one, based on a kind of contract which presupposes reciprocity. On the one hand, the guru promises to protect the *śiṣya* (disciple), to provide spiritual guidance, and to display compassion for the difficulties he or she might encounter on the spiritual path. On the other hand, the disciple promises to follow the guru's commands, to fulfill them truly and unconditionally, to serve the guru through *guruseva*, to allow the guru to work on his/her *samskāras*, and to have trust in the guru's ability to lead him/her towards the final goal of salvation (Mlecko 1982; Mahony 1997; Teskey Denton 2004: 62–68). That strong bond in the guru-

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[44] The concept of *avatār* will be presented in Chapter VII.

[45] For a study of the guru institution in *vaiṣṇava* contexts, see Måns Broo, *As Good as God: The Guru in Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism*, Åbo 2003.

disciple relationship is understood by one of Amritanandamayi's disciples in the following way:

> A True Guru, after binding his disciple to him through love, will gradually take the disciple through a course of discipline to slowly reveal all the workings of the mind, both gross and subtle, down to the subtlest point of where the existence of the mind starts. Reaching the bottom of the mind, the disciple comes to see the Truth shining within as his own Self and finds that the body and mind are unreal projections of the Self, his true Nature. (Swami Paramatmananda 1987, vol. I: 272)

Another distinctive element emerging with *tantra* was the belief that gurus possessed extraordinary powers. Whereas a guru's ability to impart spiritual knowledge was still highly sought after, the mystical perceptions of guruhood entailed that spiritual functions became surrounded by secrecy. New spiritual practices and rituals of an esoteric nature were introduced, among others the practice of the five m's, well-known among contemporary westerners and also highly misunderstood.[46] One central characteristic introduced in *tantra* was a belief in the ability of gurus to awaken the disciple's *kuṇḍalinī*, or spiritual energy, through energy transmission. A basic understanding in *tantra* is that all life, on the microscopic level as well as the macroscopic one, is permeated by a constant flow of energy. On the microcosmic level, *kuṇḍalinī* is the energy believed to flow in the human body. It is compared to a curled snake lying at the base of the spine of human beings, waiting for its awakening:

> La *kuṇḍalinī* […] est la suprême Énergie, unie à Śiva, éternelle, omniprésente, non soumise à l'espace ni au temps et pourtant présente dans tous les corps humains; elle est donc à la fois suprême et non-suprême. Elle se tient dans le cercle inférieur, le *mulādhāra*, de tous les hommes, brillante et semblable à l'éclair, enroulée sur elle-même comme un serpent endormi. En cette Déesse éclatante, plus subtile que le subtil, épouse de Śiva, se trouvent tous les dieux, tous les *mantra*, tous les *tattva* (donc toute

[46] The five *pañcamakāra* or "five substances" such as *māmṣa*: meat; *matsya*: fish; *madya*: wine; *mudrā*: parched grain; and *maithuna*, [ritual] sexual intercourse.

> l'énergie phonique et ce qui en découle). (Padoux 1963: 113)

In addition to the importance ascribed to the *kuṇḍalinī* energy in *tantra*, initiation, or *dīkṣā* (from the Sanskrit root *dīkṣ* "to consecrate," "to dedicate") was highly emphasized. One element of the utmost importance related to *dīkṣā* is the transmission of a mantra, which traditionally is whispered by the guru into the right ear of the seeker. Special powers came to be attributed to mantras, which were believed to be "infused" with the guru's energy and power. Mantras were understood as conscious energy with the ability to affect physical and subtle levels of the body. The mantra was not supposed to be written down since it could then lose its powerful effects. However, when properly used, the mantra was believed to give superhuman skills (*siddhis*), such as the power to control one's own and other people's lives and thoughts, to perform miracles, or to cure diseases. It is also with the emergence of *tantra* that the mantra began to be understood as the self, and the self understood as the guru, leading to the establishment of identification between the mantra, the self, and the guru (Padoux 2000: 41–42).[47] The prevalence of spiritual practices colored by *tantra*, and the widespread belief that human beings may be possessed of divine powers are still widely visible in today's Indian religiosity as the present study will demonstrate.

## 2. Slowly emerging from their invisibility

In my view, the existence of female religious leadership throughout Indian history is, so far, scantily documented. For years, I have often been puzzled by the superficiality of most available scholarly surveys attempting to show the following tendency: the relatively high status of women in the idealized Golden Age of Vedic texts, followed by the degradation of her position in the following centuries reflected, for instance, in the *sūtras*, epics, and early *smṛtis* (Altekar 1999; Kane 1974; Young 1987; Sugirtharajah 1998). Ellison Banks Findly argues that in Vedic times, "a broad class of female teachers (*upādhyāyānīs* and *āchāryās*) was prevalent throughout society, and it is probable that

[47] For more information about *tantra*, see also Agehananda Bharati, *The Tantric Tradition*, London 1965.

teaching was the most common profession open to women" (Banks Findly 1985: 40). In support of their claims, scholars mention a few Vedic female philosophers known as Gargī Vāchaknavī, Vaḍavā Prātītheyī, and Sulabhā Maitreyī. From these few pieces of evidence, most scholars draw the conclusion that women had high religious status in ancient times.

As far as I understand, however, studying the position of women in ancient times is not an easy task, given the paucity of sources such as iconography, diaries, chronicles, or narrative history giving voice to women's experiences. One scholar who has researched this issue is the Indologist Stephanie W. Jamison. Jamison claims that the reason why the position of women in ancient times is scantily documented in contemporary scholarship is that most scholars in gender studies distrust philological text studies, believing that these can not provide trustworthy information on gender issues (Jamison 1996: 4). According to Jamison, the only source of material available is precisely religious texts, and she claims that in that respect, the four Vedas are a good example of a corpus of texts almost entirely unutilized in that area. What she finds interesting is that Vedic texts give detailed minute-by-minute information on how rituals were conducted (Jamison 1996: 9–10).

While social, political, and gender approaches have been applied to ancient India, Jamison is not fond of such perspectives. She claims that one pitfall of such approaches is that they tend to distort the contents of the texts to suit the scholar's purpose, given that one is tempted to read into the texts what one wishes to see, using a social, political, or gender lens. In contrast, she believes that the philological method itself "tends to rein us in from ideological leaps, forces us to listen to the text, word for word, not impose our mental will on it" (Jamison 1996: 5).[48] One objection she raises to social, political, and gender approaches is that the contradictions found within one text, or between different texts, are most of the time ignored. As Jamison phrases it: "The submissive woman of (some parts of) the legal texts is not the aggressively active one of many epic narratives nor the punctilious ritual partner of the ritual texts" (Jamison 1996: 11).

[48] The emphasis is Jamison's.

While I agree with Stephanie W. Jamison's claims, I also believe that another problem with most historical surveys of that kind is that they attempt to delineate in a few pages, or a few chapters, what happened during a long span of time, i.e., hundreds of years, and ignore the gaps of time in between. Hence, I agree with Jamison that the issue deserves further elaborate treatment and that in order to rectify an overly, premature and un-nuanced picture of women's position in ancient India, in-depth efforts based on a narrow text study still need to be undertaken.

The historian of religions Nancy Falk is one scholar who has examined the idealized picture of women in the Vedas. According to Falk, the emphasis put on the two *brahmavādinīs* (literally "she who knows the teachings of Brahma"), Gargī and Maitreyī in the *upaniṣads*, is relatively new. It was part of neo-vedantic interpretations of Hinduism introduced in the nineteenth century CE by *svāmī* Dayananda, the founder of the *Arya Samaj*. That idealized picture has since then been carried out and accepted by many. It was picked up by, among others, the religious reformer Vivekananda and further propagated by the *Ramakrishna Mission*'s *svāmīs* and followers (Falk 1995: 311). One of those is *svāmī* Ghanananda:

> In Vedic times equal opportunities were afforded to men and women, boys and girls, for education and work. Girls like boys were given the *upanayana* or initiation into *Gāyatrī* and *brahmacharya* (celibacy and study). […] Many women became Vedic scholars, and also great philosophers, keen debaters and brilliant teachers. Furthermore, Vedic sacrifices were usually to be offered jointly by a man and his wife. (Ghanananda 1979: 1–2)

According to Falk, the reason for Dayananda and Vivekananda's idealized picture of women in the Vedas was that they wanted to give women access to Vedic knowledge previously considered the strict prerogative of males (Falk 1995: 310–311). They also wanted to give authority to the teachings of women of their time and to give them role-models to follow.[49] In order to sum up, we can see that what so

[49] That positive picture of women in ancient India is shared by most *gurus* and devotees I have met. See for example the interview conducted in Delhi with *svāmī* Sidheshwarananda, Madhobi Ma's disciple, 30.10.2001.

far emerges from available scholarly evidence is that the prevalence of female spiritual teachers in the past is still a very little investigated field. Even if it appears to be beyond all doubt that Vivekananda had a considerable impact on elevating women to positions of religious leadership, we can also see that what took place before his lifetime partly remains in the shadows of scholarship.

Examining contemporary history is a somewhat easier task as we can rely on various sources of material. However, given the difficulty of identifying female spiritual masters, I strongly believe that the seventy women who are part of the present study are not an exhaustive sample, and that far more female gurus remain unknown to me. That means that although contemporary female gurus are relatively numerous, most of them are also well-hidden and therefore unknown to the great majority of people. From that state of affairs, I want to suggest that the existence of female spiritual masters throughout Indian history is probable, even if there is so far not much evidence to support that assumption, and even if we do not know to what extent the phenomenon occurred and what form it took.

Another issue which has recently started being explored in scholarship is the growing prominence of Indian women today in public religious leadership roles, along with the acceptance, and even the promotion of these roles by men. In her article "Shakti Ascending: Hindu Women, Politics, and Religious Leadership during the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," Nancy Falk acknowledges that the issue had been puzzling her for many years until it was clarified while exploring the interaction of political, social, and religious changes during the British colonial period. Falk believes that the Hindu tradition has always been patriarchal in its institutional structures, "especially in public roles of the upper-caste brahmin-dominated tradition" and that women have traditionally been relegated to the sphere of marriage and bearing children (Falk 1995: 298). However, she has noticed that the masculine dominance went through significant changes during the last century when women gained access to the guru role as never before, wearing the saffron robes of the *sannyāsiṇī*, studying Sanskrit, performing Vedic fire rituals, and heading schools, colleges, and orphanages sponsored by religious organizations and *āśrams* (Falk 1995: 299). What Falk finds noteworthy, however, is that men have played a significant role in promoting that process. She believes that "in fact,

virtually every male guru of note has produced at least one prominent female protégé – several of whom have been, ironically, foreigners" (Falk 1995: 300).

According to Falk, the emerging prominence of women in public religious roles can be understood as "a by-product of a conservative and male-initiated process – the process by which Hindu men sought to conserve their integrity and self-respect in the presence of British colonialists" (Falk 1995: 301). According to traditional views, women have been idealized for their qualities, i.e., they have been perceived as "more pure and modest than men, more spiritual than men, more selfless than men, more resilient and tolerant than men, more moral, less corrupt and less violent than men" (Falk 1995: 324).

Falk believes that while men were working in the public sphere for the material welfare of their families, they came in touch with new western ideas and ways of life such as smoking, drinking alcohol, and eating meat – values which threatened the very foundations of Hindu cultural, social, and spiritual heritage (Falk 1995: 307). Accordingly, women were made keepers and guardians of spiritual and cultural values such as wearing the traditional sari, eating vegetarian food, and observing Hindu religious rituals. While colonialism changed the economic and political situation in India negatively, the superior and un-colonized Hindu spirit could remain intact through women (Falk 1995: 306–307).

As a consequence of this eagerness to preserve the Hindu heritage, revivalists such as the followers of the *Arya Samaj* started instructing women in spiritual areas, imparting Vedic teachings and spiritual practices which were traditionally exclusively reserved for men. Hindu revivalists believed it was time for women to get back to the respected and worthy Vedic status they were believed to have lost during the course of history. Another significant factor promoting female leadership positions was the active participation of women in the national independence movement led by Mahatma Gandhi in the 1930s. Showing themselves in the public sphere for the first time, women were sent to training camps, participated in courses and struggles, and thereby became conscious of their own capacities. They were ideal *satyāgrahis*, praised for their motherly qualities such as purity, renunciation, self-sacrifice, endurance, modesty, tolerance, and capacity for non-violence (Falk 1995: 320–321). Ironically, it is these qualities

which are praised in order to legitimate the involvement of women in the neo-nationalist *Hindutva* movement of today.

After the independence of India in 1947, a number of well-known female gurus came to Western countries in the 1960s and 1970s, in what can be labeled a "second wave" of Hinduism. The practice of touring western countries was initiated by *svāmī* Vivekananda when he delivered his famous lecture at *The Parliament of Religions in Chicago*, 1893, spreading the message of the unity of all religions. Moreover, after the publication of Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi* in 1946, male Indian gurus such as Rama Tirtha, Rajneesh, Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada, Shivananda, Sri Chinmoy, and Maharishi Mahesh Yogi followed in Vivekananda's footsteps and began traveling to Western countries. Interestingly, a few male gurus were followed by their female protégés.

A few female gurus settled down in the United States. One such woman is Malti, later known as Gurumayi Chidvilasananda (1955–), who leads the *Siddha Yoga* community worldwide. She came to West for the first time as Marathi-English translator for the well-known *svāmī* Muktananda. Gurumayi nowadays spends most of her time in the United States, visiting her head *āśram* in Ganespuri (Maharashtra) only occasionally. Another guru is Asha Ma from Gujarat, later known as Anandi Ma, who came to the USA with her guru Dhyanyogi Madhusudandas after being invited by devotees. She now lives permanently in the United States (Johnsen 1994: 60). Shree Ma of Kamakhya came to the United States in 1984 at the request of her guru Ramakrishna. She lives in California at *Devi Mandir āśram*. Guru Ma Jyotishanand Saraswati and Ma Yoga Shakti (1927–) are two other female gurus whose primary country of residence is the United States.

Kamala, later known as Mother Meera (1960–), settled down in Germany in 1981 with her "mentor" Venkat Reddy, a man who promoted her because he recognized her status as supreme divine being. Mother Meera is now married to a German man named Herbert Bernarz and lives in the tiny village of Thalheim situated between Köln and Frankfurt. She gives *darśan* four evenings a week in her recently bought castle *Schloss Schaumburg* where she conducts her religious activities. In 1976, the *liṅgāyat* guru Mate Mahadevi (1946–) came to the United Kingdom with her guru Lingananda *svāmī* and spent eight months there. After delivering a noteworthy lecture at the *Symposium*

*on Indian Religions* in London at the *The Institute of Oriental and African Studies of British Universities*, where she was guest of honor, she was admitted as a research student but chose to return to India in order to provide further guidance to her followers.[50]

Far from all female Indian gurus have visited Western countries and Anandamayi Ma (1896–1982) from Bengal is one of those who have not.[51] Although she never went outside India and Bangladesh, she became well-known both in Western countries and in India for her deep ecstatic states and her charisma. During her lifetime, she had a large number of Western followers, even if these remained a minority, among others the famous French writer Arnaud Desjardin. In India, Indira Gandhi numbered among Anandamayi Ma's followers.

According to what a few scholars claim, the increasing popularity of contemporary male and female guruhood can be understood in light of colonialism and political independence. Colonialism contributed to strengthening the Indian national identity and encouraged people to seek the roots of their cultural heritage. This entailed a rediscovery not only of different "forgotten" fields in areas such as arts, sculpture, music, and dancing, but also of fundamental values found in religion, philosophical systems, and politics. The revival and popularity of guruhood is a significant part of that process (Mangalwadi 1987: 5–6). Criticism of colonialism has also found a new form of expression through the strong advance of Hindu nationalism in which women enjoy great prominence. According to Amrita Basu, *Hindutva*'s female leadership, with the widow Vijayraje Scindia and the *sannyāsinīs* Uma Bharati, and *sadhvī* Rithambara as front figures, has received particular attention for "openly espous[ing] violence against Muslims" (Basu 1995: 159).

## 3. Portraits of four female gurus

In order to deepen my study and to make female guruhood more tangible for the readers, I have chosen to illustrate the present thesis with portraits of the following four gurus: Madhobi Ma (1954–) from Delhi, Anandmurti Gurumaa (1966–) from Sonepat (Haryana), Sai

[50] Interview with Mate Mahadevi in Bangalore (Karnataka) 18.11.1999.

[51] Anandamayi Ma was born in East Bengal, now Bangladesh, and moved to India after the independence of India and the partition.

Rajarajeshwari (1947–) from Mysore (Karnataka), and Shakti Devi (1953–) from Tamil Nadu. Several different types of sources have been used: notes from participant observations, interviews, hagiographical accounts, and pamphlets. Although the primary goal of the present study is to explore contemporary female guruhood in general terms, drawing on examples from my sample of seventy women, I will refer to the four gurus mentioned above in each chapter when I find it relevant.

### Madhobi Ma, a *śākta* guru from Delhi

Madhobi Ma, affectionately called Guru Ma by her followers, is a *śākta* guru from Delhi, living at *Matrika Ashram*. The first time I came in contact with her was in 2001. I had been in touch with *svāmī* Sidheshwarananda, one of her closest disciples, via e-mail a short time before my visit in India, and he told me that I was most welcome to meet Mataji when I was in Delhi. At that time, *svāmī* Sidheshwarananda had spent twenty-two years "at the lotus feet of his guru" as he usually expresses it in his correspondence with me.[52]

The day before the appointment, I received a message from *svāmī* Sidheshwarananda telling me that Madhobi Ma was only able to meet me that very day. Two hours later, I was at *Matrika Ashram* in Dakshinpuri, a well-to-do South Delhi area. The *āśram* is located in a large private house and after being welcomed by *svāmī* Sidheshwarananda outside, I entered a large room where Madhobi Ma held *darśan*. In the center of the room, the floor of which was covered with colorful carpets, Madhobi Ma, dressed in a saffron-colored sari, sat on a chair speaking with people. A few devotees sat on the floor in front of her, while others waited outside in order to receive her blessings. Madhobi Ma addressed me immediately in a very friendly and relaxed manner, and *svāmī* Sidheshwarananda translated from Bengali and Hindi into English. Although Madhobi Ma understands English, she does not speak the language.[53]

The interview lasted two hours and was often interrupted by people coming, going, and asking questions; some asked questions in different Indian languages, others came with offerings, among other things, a piece of gold jewelry. A woman who apparently worked at

52 E-mail from *svāmī* Sidhesvarananda in Delhi, 28.9.2001.
53 Field notes, Delhi, 29.10.2001.

the *āśram* approached her several times, passing her a cell phone. I was told that some of her devotees call her at any time for spiritual guidance or to air some problem. Another person came to get her signature on a piece of paper that I later identified as a check. Children screamed and ran around us. I was told that fifteen people reside permanently at *Matrika Ashram* and, according to Madhobi Ma, between one hundred and fifty and two hundred persons come every day for *darśan*.[54] She estimates that she has between 100 000 and 150 000 initiated devotees, but claims that her following is larger if non-initiated devotees are included.[55]

Madhobi Ma was born on May 11, 1954, in Kolkata (West Bengal), to a respected *brāhmaṇa* family. According to her own claims, she has royal origins and is a distant relative of the well-known social reformer Rammohun Roy (1774–1833).[56] Her father, Sasadhara Chowdhary, was an aristocratic *zamindār* (landowner) from East Bengal, and as a rich landowner, he provided financial assistance to, among others, Mother Teresa to support her charitable activities.[57] Both her father and her mother, Kamalnayani Devi, were pious Hindus and had the Muslim Sufi Saint, Syed Ali Akhtar as their family spiritual teacher (Sidheshwarananda 1991: 2). Despite their privileged situation, the couple yearned for a female child, given that they already had thirteen male children.

When she was fifty-five years old, however, Kamalnayani Devi got pregnant again.[58] At that time, the family lineage had been waiting for a female child for the last seven generations. According to *svāmī* Sidheshwarananda, Madhobi Ma's conception defied "natural laws" (Sidheshwarananda 1991: 2).[59] One evening, when she went out to perform her daily rituals to the family's guru, Kamalnayani Devi saw "an elliptical shaped halo of light" descending from the sky (Sidheshwarananda 1991: 2–3). She became petrified. This halo of light touched her left wrist and then vanished, overwhelming Kamalnayani Devi with a deep feeling of ecstasy. The following night, she dreamed

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[54] Field notes, Delhi, 29.10.2001.

[55] Field notes, Delhi, 30.10.2001.

[56] Field notes, Delhi 29.10.2001.

[57] Field notes, Delhi, 30.10.2001.

[58] Pamphlet *Revered Sage Mother Madhobi-Maa*, published at *Matrika Ashram* in Dakshinpuri, New Delhi.

[59] Interview with Madhobi Ma in Delhi, 29.10.2001.

that a beautiful female baby merged into her through the bite on her wrist. A couple of months after that incident, Kamalnayani understood that she was pregnant. The period of gestation is said to have been unusually long: thirteen months (Sidheshwarananda 1991: 3).

One evening, after performing her evening rituals, Kamalnayani Devi entered the courtyard of the house and felt something coming down between her legs. A bundle that looked like a human stomach rolled down onto the ground. Hearing her shouting, Kamalnayani Devi's mother came out of the house and collected the bundle on a tray. She asked for a pair of scissors and cut open the membrane enveloping the bundle (Sidheshwarananda 1991: 4–5). The story recounts that "an extremely beautiful new-born baby like a full moon" with matted hair reaching down to her ankles was lying inside while a rainbow illuminated the sky (Sidheshwarananda 1991: 5; 6). The child was given the name Ranu, and was later known as Madhobi Ma.

Madhobi Ma's hagiographical story recounts that like those of other saints, Ranu's childhood was unusual. Ranu had a tangible spiritual inclination from a young age and could immerse herself in meditation for hours, the first time when she was only eight-months-old. She could walk when she was newly born and stopped sleeping at the age of six. She acknowledges that from a young age, she could communicate with "astral" gurus, people who are not in a physical body and thus can not be seen (Sidheshwarananda 1991: 7–8).[60] As she grew older, Ranu's spiritual inclinations became more and more obvious to the people around her. This eventually resulted in a period of working with mother Teresa, the well-known Albanian catholic nun from Kolkata, who, seeing her spiritual inclinations, asked her to become a nun of the order.[61]

However, Ranu's spiritual path was to take another direction. When she was seven years old, her parents had taken her to Tārāpīṭh, a village located in Birbhum in West Bengal, and the visit had further stimulated her spiritual yearning. She had met Shankar Khepa, a *yogī* from the *śākta mārga* who gave her mantra initiation while whispering the *iṣṭa* mantra in her ear (Swami Sidheshwarananda 1991: 14). After that event, Ranu stopped feeling any attraction for worldly life. Her

[60] Interview with Madhobi Ma in Delhi, 29.10.2001.

[61] Field notes, Delhi, 30.10.2001.

parents started worrying about her and, feeling helpless, they brought her to a sage. The sage predicted that Ranu's life was meant for God's worship and that she would become famous one day, devoting herself to mankind in order to alleviate human suffering (Swami Sidheshwarananda 1991: 14–15).

It is said that when Ranu was still a child, eleven of her thirteen brothers died within the span of one year, but that she showed no signs of mourning. Her unusual reaction strengthened her parents' worries to such an extent that they decided that marriage would be a good means of bringing her back to worldly concerns (Swami Sidheshwarananda 1991: 15). At that time, Ranu wanted to take formal *dīkṣa* from her guru, Shankar Khepa, but her guru made her understand that she had a far greater mission to accomplish on earth: to serve as a mother for the benefit of humanity. "How will you be able to serve as a mother if you don't marry?" he asked her.[62]

Accordingly, Ranu received the command from her male guru to marry and it was predicted that her sons would assist her in her mission (Swami Sidheshwarananda 1991: 16). When she was only thirteen years old, she was married to a commoner working in New Delhi. While inwardly and secretly yearning for *dīkṣā*, externally, she conformed to the expectations put on her as a householder. She gave birth to two sons who expired and, later on, to one girl, Dipa, and two boys, Ravi and Purnananda.[63] *Svāmī* Sidheshwarananda reports that Ranu experienced the first years of marriage as a time of captivity and endless yearning for her guru (Swami Sidheshwarananda 1991: 16).

In March 1973, at the age of nineteen, Ranu's parents again took their daughter to Tārāpīṭh temple, where the goddess Tārā is the presiding deity, close to a local *smaśāna* ("cremation ground"). Ranu's parents let her meet Shankar Khepa again, but this time instead of dissuading her from spirituality, the guru gave her formal *dīkṣa* and made her his disciple. He gave her the Tārā mantra and the spiritual name "Madhobi Ma". The esoteric signification of her name is explained as follows: *Ma* stands for "Holy Mother," *dhā* for *dhāranī*, "the upholder of this creation," and *bi (vi)* for *viśva brahmānanda*, "the creation itself," i.e., "the whole universe" (Swami Sidheshwarananda

[62] Field notes, Delhi, 29.10.2001.

[63] Field notes, Delhi, 30.10.2001.

1991: 17). Shankar Khepa also imparted knowledge of various disciplines to her such as astrology, palmistry, *āyurveda*, and the theological secrets of *Kaula Dharma*, i.e., the left-hand practice of *tantras* (Swami Sidheshwarananda 1991: 17; Khanna 2002b: 141).

Traditionally, in *Kaula Dharma*, the spiritual lineage is passed on to the most capable male disciple. However, Ranu's guru made an exception to this rule, and thus she was made the 42nd guru of the Rṛṣi Vasiṣṭha Lineage of Tārāpīṭh as the first woman.[64] According to ancient yogic tradition, Vasiṣṭhamuṇi was a king and one of the seven sages or *rṣis* living in the forest. It is believed that Vasiṣṭha attained perfection (*siddhi*) at Tārāpīṭh "upon a seat made of five skulls" (*pañcamuṇḍāsana*) (McDaniel 1989: 88). However, the village of Tārāpīṭh was mainly famous because of the recent saint Vāmākṣepā (McDaniel 1989: 88). Like most *ṛṣis*, Vasiṣṭhamuṇi was married.

In addition to her family's guru, Syed Ali Akthar Bade Baba, and her own guru, Shankar Khepa, Madhobi Ma received spiritual instructions and initiations from four more *ācāryas*. In 1973, she received the *śrīvidyā* mantra with *pūrṇābhiśekha* from Ramanikanta Deva Sharma of Kamakhya (Assam) who worshiped the goddess Tripurasundarī.[65] He gave her the *śaktipāt* initiation the goal of which is to awaken the spiritual cosmic energy or *śākti* (Swami Sidheshwarananda 1991: 17). In 1974, she received *kuṇḍalinī* transmission from Narayana Datt Tirtha (also called Gufa Baba) in the caves of Gomukha in the Himalayas (Swami Sidheshwarananda 1991: 18). In 1982, she was initiated into Kālī worship, in its extreme Aghora or esoteric aspects, by Ganesh Narayana, a *śaiva paṇḍit* from Chirawa (Rajasthan). Finally, in 1985, she received the Kṛṣṇa mantra from Keshavananda, a *smārta* guru *svāmī*, in New Delhi (Khanna 2002b: 142–144).

While Madhobi Ma acknowledges that the main function of *ācāryas* and gurus is to teach, she also claims that they differ greatly from each other in many respects. She believes that to become a guru, one has to be initiated into a proper lineage, or a proper school. "This difference is sanctioned by the scriptures" she says.[66] During the interviews I conducted with Madhobi Ma, the importance of being initiated into a

[64] Interview with Madhobi Ma in Delhi, 29.10.2001 and field notes, Delhi 29.10.2001.
[65] Both Tārāpīṭh and Kamakhya are well known *śaktipiṭh* or places of power. For a short survey of *śaktipiṭhs*, see for example Erndl 1993, 32–36.
[66] Interview with Madhobi Ma in Delhi, 30.10.2001.

formal spiritual lineage was emphasized again and again. "To become a guru," she says, "you have to be given the seat of guruhood properly" in order to get "protection from the lineage."[67] According to her, it is like earning a degree at the university. Madhobi Ma claims that a guru has to follow the norms of the scriptures, even if he/she makes innovations and own interpretations. She also says that in *kaliyuga*, there are many self-proclaimed gurus who do not have the quality of the old ones. They popularize ancient scriptures in order to make them more digestible to westerners, and because of their interaction with westerners, gurus harvest recognition and status in their own country. Madhobi Ma claims that right now, there is a maximum of twelve male and female *sadgurus* empowered to give *śaktipāt*: a few are from the Yogananda family and others from the line of Madhobi Ma's gurus.[68]

According to *svāmī* Sidheshwarananda, the *Kaula Dharma* followed by Madhobi Ma's guru, Shankar Khepa, is part of an esoteric *śākta* path belonging to the *mahātantra,* a high level of *tantra*. Accordingly, people following that spiritual path live a secret life and never reveal their true identity.[69] To exemplify what he means, he refers to the well-known quotation attributed to Śiva: "Inside you are a *śākta*, outside you are like a *śaiva,* amongst gatherings, you are like a *vaiṣṇava*. A *Kaula* roams the earth in different forms."[70] According to him, the reasons why real *tantra* should not be revealed are threefold: first, it is not supposed to be revealed; second, people will misunderstand it; third, people will disturb you because they think you have occult powers.[71]

In 1977, Madhobi Ma established the *Mahab Seva Mahal*, a non-profit organization aiming, among other things, to serve mankind irrespective of religious faith and to give free *āyurveda* treatment to the poor at medical camps (Swami Sidheshwarananda 1991: 20). She also organizes marriages for destitute young women, providing couples with all the necessities. Needy schoolchildren are provided free books, stationary, and school uniforms, and widows are provided food, cash, and clothing (Sidheshwarananda 1991: 20–22). Madhobi

[67] Field notes, Delhi, 30.10.2001.
[68] Interview with Madhobi Ma in Delhi, 30.10.2001.
[69] Interview with Madhobi Ma in Delhi, 29.10.2001.
[70] Field notes, Delhi, 29.10.2001. *Svāmī* Sidhesvarananda's own quotation.
[71] Interview with Madhobi Ma in Delhi, 29.10.2001.

Ma has also founded the *Shiva Institute of Research* and has organized exhibitions promoting science education among the masses (Swami Sidheshwarananda 1991: 27, 29).

In 1984, Madhobi Ma established the *Matrika Ashram* in Dakshinpuri named after the goddess Kālī (Swami Sidheshwarananda 1991: 36). The temple enshrines *mūrtis* of the goddesses Rājarājeśvarī and Kālī, among others. As a *śākta* guru, Madhobi Ma gives high priority to Tantric practices emphasizing *āsanas*, *mudrās*, *kuṇḍalinī*, and *cakras*. She is said to have a vast knowledge of yoga, *āyurveda*, "naturopathy," palmistry, and astrology, as well as the power of awakening the dormant energy, and making astral journeys (Swami Sidheshwarananda 2001). She is believed to be a *vākyasiddha* meaning that whatever she foretells about someone is bound to happen. She is also believed to heal physical ailments through her "astral power."[72] Madhobi Ma conducts programs at *Matrika Ashram* where she teaches the practices of *kriyāyoga* and sings *bhājans* (devotional songs) composed by her (Swami Sidheshwarananda 2001). She has also established the *Sri Adya Shakti Pith* for spiritual seekers, a temple located in Tanakpur in the Himalayas.

**Anandmurti Gurumaa from Haryana**

During winter 2005, I made contact with Anandmurti Gurumaa via e-mail. After presenting myself and my research, I mentioned that I intended to come to India in January 2006 and that I wished to stay in her *āśram* for one week, in order, among other things, to conduct an interview with her. One of her male devotees in charge of the *āśram* office answered on her behalf and complied with my requests. He asked me to write again a couple of weeks before my *āśram* visit in order to remind him of the interview. I did as requested and in a reply from the *āśram* office, I was asked to send my list of questions by e-mail.

The day after my arrival at the so-called *Village Barhi* where the *āśram* is located, a male follower told me that Anandmurti Gurumaa had checked my questions and that the interview was going to take place soon. He wanted, however, to go through the list of questions with me. He further said that Gurumaa was not willing to answer six of my twenty-one questions. The rejected questions dealt with her

[72] Pamphlet *Revered Sage Mother Madhobi-Maa*.

family and social background, whether her decision to live in celibacy had met resistance from her relatives, the size of her following, her opinion about gurus claiming to have healing powers and other *siddhis*, and whether she is considered to be an incarnation of a goddess by her followers and her opinion about it. While commenting on the three first questions, the male devotee exclaimed: "These questions don't make sense to a spiritual master, they are too worldly!" Moreover, he mentioned that Gurumaa wanted me to reformulate three of the twenty-one questions. I was also told that the interview was going to be recorded for a DVD intended to be used for the propagation of her teachings to her many followers worldwide. The interview took place late in the afternoon the following day, and contrary to all the other interviews I have conducted in India, it unfolded in a disciplined manner and was quite formal, providing very few opportunities for follow-up questions. In addition to the film crew, two female Indian *āśram* visitors who lived in the UK were present during the interview, sitting casually at Gurumaa's feet.

*Village Barhi* is a beautiful *āśram* situated close to Gannaur (Sonepat District) in Haryana's flat countryside, three kilometers from the highway connecting Delhi and Punjab, and it is still under construction. The experience of coming to *Village Barhi* was different from all the other *āśrams* that I visited. Anandmurti's *āśram* is situated several kilometers from the closest village and is totally secluded. Hence, there are only limited opportunities to go out to buy necessities such as fruit or toilet paper, or to get access to a telephone, Internet, or a rickshaw. During my eight-day stay, I had to ask the female cleaner residing some kilometers from the *āśram* to buy washing powder for me. In other words, the *āśram* is meant to be a quiet place for retreat, far away from civilization.

The central part of the *āśram* consists of a park with ponds, small bridges, birdhouse, benches, flowers and trees partly resembling a Japanese garden. The park is surrounded by different buildings such as an office, a temple, Gurumaa's residence, a refectory, a meditation hall, and dormitories. When I entered the office for the first time and introduced myself, I found the atmosphere among people rather cold. After having paid the fee for my room, the lady in charge of the accommodations for visitors informed me very briefly of the daily *āśram* schedule. She also added that I was expected to participate in daily

morning and evening meditation sessions and to respect silence (*mauna*) between 10:00 and 12:00 a.m. Moreover, I was also informed that to enter the meditation hall, it was compulsory to wear special white- or saffron-colored *colās*, which could be purchased in the *āśram* (the white *pañjābīs* I had brought with me were not acceptable).

Given the minimal introduction, and the rapidity with which the *āśram* schedule was explained to me, I tried several times to ask people I met in the gardens about the details of the *āśram* schedule and how to find my way around. From their very brief answers, I soon realized that people were in silence practically all day long focusing upon their *sādhana*, and therefore did not want to be disturbed. Later on, I also noticed that small sign-posts with the text "Silence please" were scattered throughout the lawns and paths of the *āśram*.

Anandmurti Gurumaa was born on April 8, 1966, in Amritsar (Panjab) and is daughter to an affluent Sikh family which migrated from Gujranwala during the partition of the subcontinent and set up a transport business.[73] She is the second of four siblings, one boy and three girls. Her parents were highly devotional, receiving saints in their home, and already at young age she showed a special affinity for seers.[74] She received her education at the *Sacred Heart Convent School* followed by the *Government College for Women* in Panjab where she received a Bachelor of Arts degree.[75]

At the age of fourteen, Anandmurti Gurumaa had a life-changing spiritual experience in meditation, leading to a state of permanent enlightenment when she was sixteen years old in Vrindavan.[76] When she was fifteen years old, an elder sage and friend of her urged her to begin giving talks (*Truth Exposed*: 89). Later on, when she was studying in college, she regularly delivered spiritual discourses at *satsaṅgs* after attending her college lectures. She never prepared these talks but just expressed whatever came into her mind. From that age onwards, she has continued delivering lectures.

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[73] Khushwant Singh, "Neither Blind nor Deaf to the Beauties of Nature", *The Tribune of India*, 24.8.2002.
http://www.tribuneindia.com/2002/20020824/windows/above.htm

[74] http://www.gurusofindia.com/gurumaa/

[75] E-mail from Deepika Mehndroo, 12.11.2005.
http://www.tribuneindia.com/2002/20020824/windows/above.htm

[76] Interview with Anandmurti Gurumaa in Gannaur (Haryana), 21.1.2006.

Anandmurti Gurumaa recounts how her popularity began to grow. She claims that when she was young, she was never at home. She was a wanderer, traveling extensively to various holy places such as Rishikesh, Haridvar, and Vrindavan. She sought the company of like-minded people, and was therefore always roaming about in religious congregations where various sages, *sādhūs*, and *mahātmas* – "those hidden friends who have tasted the nectar" – were sitting.[77] She was very inquisitive from a young age, eager to know whether holy people had realized what they talked about. Accordingly, when she participated in gurus' *satsaṅgs*, she listened to their talks and then asked questions. She did not want to test sages but rather to make sure that they were not just doing empty propagation of philosophy because, as she says, "it is so hard to find such [enlightened] individuals." She eventually noticed that wherever she went, people were attracted to her because of her young age. People started following her in order to learn about who she was, and Anandmurti Gurumaa allowed them to be in her company.[78]

Her giving of talks was interrupted by a gap of three years when she cut herself off from society and observed silence. She says that at that time, she had to withdraw from crowds as she felt that nobody listened to her message. Nowadays, she admits that, deep inside, she is not very fond of delivering lectures (*Truth Exposed*: 90). She would prefer to spend her time staying quiet and enjoying her "own world of carefree enjoyment" (*Going Beyond the Mind*: 51). However, she believes that God is making her speak in order to guide others on the path of enlightenment (*Truth Exposed*: 90). She also confesses that being a spiritual teacher is never an "obligation" or a "duty" to her: "I always say that I am not doing service to anyone; I am just celebrating my own being and I am just inviting others to be a participant in this great party which is happening."[79]

At present, Anandmurti Gurumaa lives in her *āśram* most of the year. While only a few people are allowed to be permanent residents, she welcomes thousands of seekers from all over India and overseas for shorter visits. The *āśram* was established about a decade ago and is in full expansion. Right now, it has the capacity to accommodate up to

[77] Interview with Anandmurti Gurumaa in Gannaur (Haryana), 21.1.2006.
[78] Interview with Anandmurti Gurumaa in Gannaur (Haryana), 21.1.2006.
[79] http://www.gurumaa.com/spiritual-question-answers/is-it-your-duty.html

five hundred people simultaneously.[80] It shelters about fifty permanent residents as well as other visitors wishing to enjoy the quietness of the place or to participate in meditation programs. Anandmurti Gurumaa travels also in India and abroad, delivering lectures to large audiences, and conducting meditation and yoga camps (*śivirs*) where she teaches different meditation techniques. Apart from teaching abroad a couple of times a year, the meditation camps, usually five days long, are mostly conducted in her *āśram* or in Rishikesh. The program usually starts at six a.m., and all day long, Anandmurti Gurumaa teaches dynamic, active, and passive meditation techniques. Every evening ends with a lecture.[81]

Anandmurti Gurumaa's devotees estimate the size of her following to be nearly one million people. She has become a well-known figure in spiritual contexts through her daily appearance on the 24-hour *Sony* TV Channel where she delivers *pravacans* (religious sermons) in Hindi. Every morning, she appears on the screen at 7:30 and is not only seen in India but has a worldwide following among the North Indian diaspora.[82] She speaks on Hindu scriptures such as the Vedas and the *upaniṣads*, along with various saints such as Sufi mystics as well as different socio-economic issues.[83] Anandmurti Gurumaa is the author of many books on meditation and philosophy, writing being an ability she already mastered from a very tender age, composing poetry as a child. Moreover, she is known for her singing voice and has recorded different CDs and DVDs where she combines Sufi poetry and Indian classical music.

Anandmurti Gurumaa's understanding of spirituality is "ecumenical" and she is known to be well-acquainted with different religions such as Zen Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Sufism.[84] Because of her background in Sikhism, she often employs a Sikh terminology and refers to Guru Nanak and Sikh scriptures such as the *Adi Granth* (*Guruvani*, "The guru's voice"). She is also said to be strongly inspired by Sufism, and in books and lectures, she often quotes Sufi mystics such as Jalaluddin Rumi, Hazarat Shah Hussain, Mulla Nasrudin, Baba

[80] http://www.gurumaa.com/ashram_architecture.asp
[81] http://www.gurumaa.com/meditation.htm
[82] Interview with Anandmurti Gurumaa in Gannaur (Haryana), 21.1.2006.
[83] http://gurumaa.com/home.htm
[84] E-mail from Deepika Mehndroo, 12.11.2005.

Farid, Baba Bullehshah, and Hazarat Babu. She refers to Buddhism and Christianity as well. When speaking of enlightenment, she often refers to "buddhahood," instead of using the term *mokṣa* usually employed in Hinduism. Anandmurti Gurumaa also stresses interfaith dialogue and the universality of Eastern and Western spirituality. She has so far established two meditation centers abroad, one in the United Kingdom and one in Canada.

In the few comments I found about her, Anandamurti Gurumaa is presented as a "rebellious seeker" having developed innovative methods of meditation (*The Awakening* 2000: I). Moreover, as a female guru, she questions most traditional Hindu beliefs and patriarchal values such as "caste" and women's status. She is deeply touched by the grievances faced by today's Indian women such as female infanticide and lack of education. She considers these things to be unfortunate anomalies in a country where women are perceived as the embodiment of *śakti* and where the goddess Durgā is widely worshiped. For that reason, she has founded a special assistance program called *Shakti*, dedicated to the economic, academic, social, and spiritual empowerment of women and providing, among other things, free education for girls.[85] Anandmurti Gurumaa's unconventional and innovative approach to spirituality, which can be seen in her books published in English, her discourses, and question-and-answer sessions on the website, will be referred to throughout my study.

Like many other gurus, Anandmurti Gurumaa has started different charitable projects through the establishment of a trust financed by alms and donations from the laity. The *Rishi Chaitanya Trust*, which is a growing institution, is administrated by a panel of people from various professional backgrounds such as intellectuals and businessmen, and aims "to streamline, organize, establish and propagate [Anandmurti Gurumaa's] thoughts and works."[86] It has five main objectives: to propagate love and universal brotherhood beyond religions, "castes", and creeds; to empower women; to promote education, for instance through scholarships; to organize meditation camps in India and overseas; and to organize workshops for teenagers that provide career counseling and address psychological problems.[87] One project

[85] *Shakti: Empowering the Girl Child*.
[86] http://gurumaa.com/RishiChaitanyaTrust.htm
[87] http://gurumaa.com/RishiChaitanyaTrust.htm

conducted in recent years is the reconstruction of the entire village of Nilpar, Gujarat, including its primary school, after its destruction in the earthquake of January 26, 2001.[88]

### Sai Rajarajeshwari, the miracle Goddess

As already mentioned in the introduction, my first contact with Sai Rajarajeshwari took place during autumn 2003 via e-mail, some months before a planned trip to India. However, my stay in Mysore was cancelled. One year later, I again tried to make contact without success and during my Indian trip in January-February 2006, I went to Mysore at a venture. Well there, I called a phone-number found on the website and was recommended to go to Sai Rajarajeshwari's *āśram* situated in Karekura village by the Kaveri river, thirty kilometers outside Mysore, in order to get information and buy books and photographs.[89]

After a trip by local bus and rickshaw, I arrived at the *āśram* at 10:00 a.m. In the *āśram* temple, centrally situated on the property, a *brāhmaṇa* priest was performing morning *āratī*. The temple was empty with the exception of two female western followers sitting on the floor. In the *sanctum sanctorum* stood a *mūrti* of Shirdi Sai Baba. In front of the *sanctum sanctorum* stood a red, cloth-covered chair decorated with flowers, and, later on, I learned that it was used by Sai Rajarajeshwari when holding *darśans*.[90]

To the right of the chair stood another red, cloth-covered chair covered with *vibhūti* (holy ash). I was told that Sathya Sai Baba usually sits on that chair when he visits the *āśram*. To the left of the *sanctum sanctorum* hung a large portrait of Sathya Sai Baba, and to the right, a large portrait of Sai Rajarajeshwari. Both portraits were more or less covered with *vibhūti* and white paper was fastened to the floor under the portraits in order to collect the falling ash. The same *vibhūti* phenomenon was visible on the kitchen altar that I visited after the temple ceremony. Some pictures were also covered with *kuṅkum*. According to the people I spoke with, *vibhūti* and *kuṅkum* are not produced by human hands but "manifest" of their own accord continuously and spontaneously. After the *āratī*, I bought a few books and photographs

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88 http://gurumaa.com/villageNilpar.htm
89 Field notes, Karekura (Karnataka), 31.1.2006.
90 Field notes, Karekura (Karnataka), 31.1.2006.

and the priest told me that Sai Rajarajeshwari had just come back to India the previous day from a tour abroad. He added that she intended to give *darśan* the same evening, and after a phone-call to her, I was informed through a young devotee that I was welcome to participate in the evening program.[91]

I went back to Mysore and that evening I took a taxi to the *āśram*. When I arrived at 6:30 p.m., giving some fruit to the *brāhmaṇa* priest as the tradition requires, the temple was still empty, but soon, people started arriving one by one and sat down on the floor of the temple. Finally, about fifteen persons were present, half Indian and half westerners. By 7:00 p. m., Sai Rajarajeshwari had arrived by car from her home in Mysore. Dressed in a yellow sari with golden borders and a blue blouse, she entered the temple with majesty. She looked beautiful, but older than on the pictures I had seen of her. She sat down on the chair in front of us and addressed some people, inquiring if they were well and joking with them. Soon after, she started playing the harmonium and singing *bhajans* with the public. Her singing-voice was pleasant and the performance went on for about half an hour. When it was over, she garlanded the *mūrti* of Sathya Sai Baba with great reverence. Then she just stood by the side of the *mūrti* and the *brāhmaṇa* priest performed *āratī* before both of them.[92]

When the priest was finished, Sai Rajarajeshwari approached the large portrait of Sathya Sai Baba. She scratched some *vibhūti* from the surface of the frame with a piece of paper, collected the ash, and sat down on her chair. She asked one of her devotees, an elderly man, to come forward. She exchanged some words with him and applied *vibhūti* to his forehead. Then she called a second old man and repeated the procedure. He was so moved that he burst into tears. After a while, Sai Rajarajeshwari rose from her seat and asked the gathered public to approach her one by one. People kneeled when they came before her and I was invited to participate in that part of the ceremony in the same way as the others. Sai Rajarajeshwari addressed some of her devotees personally and applied *vibhūti* to the foreheads of all. One man opened his mouth and received *vibhūti* on his tongue. When

[91] Field notes, Karekura (Karnataka), 31.1.2006. When I visited the temple at Sai Rajarajeshwari's residence in Mysore the following day, the same *vibhūti* and *kuṅkum* phenomenon occurred on the altar.

[92] Field notes, Karekura (Karnataka), 31.1.2006.

the ceremony was over, Sai Rajarajeshwari made a parcel of the piece of paper with the leftover *vibhūti* and asked a western woman, from Germany I think, to come forward. She gave her the small parcel and the western woman was radiant when she left the temple. The evening ended after fruit and sweets were distributed as *prasādaṃ* (blessed food) to the gathering.[93]

Sai Rajarajeshwari's hagiography tells us that she was born as Lalitha in Mangalore on 29, Mars 1947, of cultured *brāhmaṇa* parents, Sri Venkatramana Rao and Yamuna Bai. She has two elder brothers (*SSRS* 1999: 58–59).[94] Eventually, the family moved to Bangalore where Lalitha pursued her high school and college studies. Lalitha's relationship to her guru (*guru-śiṣya* relationship) started during her college studies. One day, while waiting for a bus in Bangalore, she saw a male "person who had an aura of divine radiance and whose calm, steady eyes gazed at Her" (*SSRS* 1999: 66). At that very moment, there was an instantaneous recognition and she remembered that she had seen that man in a dream shortly before. That person is known as Sathya Sai Baba.

At that time, Lalitha's parents were very concerned about their son's health. Some time later, a *pappād*-seller who visited her house suggested that Lalitha's parents go to Puttaparthi in order to get Sathya Sai Baba's blessing for their son's recovery. When Lalitha, accompanied by her family, finally met Sathya Sai Baba in Puttaparthi on *śivarātri*, she recognized at once the guru she had seen in her dream and while waiting for the bus in Bangalore. After the visit to Puttaparthi, the health of Lalitha's brother improved quickly and the faith and devotion of Lalitha's parents for Sathya Sai Baba grew stronger and stronger (*SSRS* 1999: 66–67).

According to the hagiography, which is said to have been dictated by the guru herself, from that time onwards, Lalitha started having visions and other spiritual experiences. She believed that Sathya Sai Baba was guiding her telepathically, showing her, directly or indirectly, that she was meant to manifest on earth as an *avatār*.[95] She started

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[93] Field notes, Karekura (Karnataka), 31.1.2006.

[94] *SSRS* is an abbreviation for *Srimad Sai Rajarajeshwari Satcharitra.*

[95] According to Mohan Rao, who is trustee of the *Srimad Sai Rajarajeshwari Trust* and one of Sai Rajarajeshwari's disciples, all facts in *SSRS* have been narrated and sanctioned by the guru "to hundred percent." Interview with Mohan Rao in Mysore (Karnataka), 5.2.2006.

grasping, exploring, and understanding the higher meaning hidden in her master's words. According to Lalitha, and contrary to what many believed, she never thought that these visions should be interpreted as projections of desires or impressions from the sub-conscious, given that they happened when she was fully conscious. On the contrary, she firmly believed that they were signs or messages pointing to coming events (*SSRS* 1999: 71–72). As time went on, Lalitha became more and more convinced that Sathya Sai Baba and she were one. She also started often visiting Puttaparthi in order to have *darśan* of Sathya Sai Baba and interact with him. From time to time, she participated in "interviews" (private *darśans*) and communicated telepathically with him. Along with the unfolding *guru-śiṣya* relationship between her and Sathya Sai Baba, it is said that Lalitha was constantly engrossed in the *nāmasmaraṇa* (remembrance of God's name). She also started experiencing a series of tests from her guru (*SSRS* 1999: 73–75). It was at that time that *vibhūti*, *kuṅkum*, and *haldi* (turmeric) started appearing spontaneously on the photographs of saints in the family home (*SSRS* 1999: 78).

During her third year of college studies, Lalitha received the opportunity to work at the *Syndicate Bank* in Mysore (Karnataka) (*SSRS* 1999: 80). However, her yearning for God had grown so strong at that point that she was drawn to the idea of renouncing the world, going to the forest, and doing *tapas*. One day, she just felt like going to Arunachala near Tiruvannamalai (Tamil Nadu). However, she was told by Sathya Sai Baba that this feeling was improper as she was meant to live in the world as an ordinary housewife, in order to set an example to mankind (*SSRS* 1999: 92). At that time, Lalitha had reached a marriageable age and her parents wanted her to get married. However, given that the idea of marriage did not appeal to her, she and her family went to Puttaparthi for advice. They were called for an interview and Sathya Sai Baba told Lalitha that he was going to select a good bridegroom for her, a suggestion which made Lalitha upset. In order to put pressure on her, Sathya Sai Baba threatened her as follows: "I shall get [sic] you married to a penniless beggar who does not own even three pennies, and who wanders the streets with a begging bowl in his hand! He should sit on your head and pound it" (*SSRS* 1999: 202). About two years after this incident, it was decided that Lalitha would marry Taranath Kamath, a colleague of hers, and according to

the hagiography, she suddenly came to understand the hidden meaning of Sathya Sai Baba's words two years before. The description of the bridegroom made by her guru fitted the God Śiva, and for the first time, she realized that her guru was going to choose her as his spiritual consort in the form of Pārvatī (*SSRS* 1999: 202–204).

On October 30, 1977, and despite her objections to living a worldly life, Lalitha married Taranath Kamath. She eventually gave birth to three children, and her hagiography tells that she managed to adjust to her duties as an ordinary housewife and mother (*SSRS* 1999: 210–212). Lalitha claims that despite being daughter, sister, wife, and mother, she has lived all her life in a state of detachment where emotions have "come and gone through [her] existence as acts in a play" (*SSRS* 1999: 214). Although her physical body has participated in all these activities, she states that her mind has never been "involved in this worldly drama" (*SSRS* 1999: 215). An event of great significance for her spiritual career occurred twenty years after her marriage. In 1997, Sathya Sai Baba asked her to reveal what she calls her true identity as goddess and *avatār* for the benefit of humanity. On March 29, 1997, on the occasion of her fiftieth birthday, she suddenly proclaimed her divinity as Sai Rajarajeshwari in an announcement to her followers (*SSRS* 1999: 330–331). That event will be described more extensively in Chapter VII.

**Shakti Devi from Tamil Nadu[96]**

I met Shakti Devi in a large city in Tamil Nadu (South India) in February 2004. Before meeting her, and according to the usual procedure, I had contacted her through e-mails, inquiring if I could come and meet her for interviews and participate for some days in her religious activities. She answered that I was welcome, and when writing to her for the second time, I included a list of questions as a starting point for our future meeting. The day after coming to India, I called her by phone and she invited me to come to her the same morning for a "meditation session." After a half-hour rickshaw ride from my hotel, I arrived in a well-to-do area and found her apartment, named *Shakti Devi Ashram*, on the second floor.[97] When I entered the room, which soon proved to be the place where she usually receives devotees, I

[96] The name "Shakti Devi" is a pseudonym.

[97] The name *Shakti Devi Ashram* is fictive.

found about six or seven people, most of them women, sitting silently on the floor with closed eyes. I quickly noticed that the *mūrtis* of Māriyammaṉ, a local, south-Indian village deity often associated with smallpox, chickenpox, and cholera, and Mahiṣāsurasamardinī, "The Slayer of the Demon," one aspect of Durgā, together with the ten Mahāvīdyas and Durgā, were standing on the altar near the wall at the back of the room. In an attached and open *pūjā* room close to the altar, another *mūrti* of Māriyammaṉ was the presiding deity beside Mahāmeru, a three-dimensional form of *yantra*.

Some minutes after my arrival, Shakti Devi, dressed in a purple sari, with *kuṅkum* on her forehead and *sindūr* (a red line in the part of the hair symbolizing married status) entered the room and sat down on a sofa. She asked two people to approach her feet. Then she closed her eyes and took a few deep breaths. While male and female devotees sat on the floor at her feet with closed eyes, Shakti Devi directed one of her palms towards their heads. Immediately, and within no more than two seconds, a man started breathing heavily, and after a few more seconds his body went over backward like a bow and he fell back on the floor while still sitting in meditation posture. The woman at his side began shaking and eventually started crying.

About ten minutes later, the ceremony was over and Shakti Devi kindly addressed me. She explained that while sitting close to her, many people fall spontaneously into altered states of consciousness.[98] She described that the *kuṇḍalinī* energy emanates all the time from her body, especially from her palms, feet, and the top of the head (*sahasrāra*) and that this power can activate the *cakras* of people around her. People whose *cakras* are already opened through spiritual practices usually react instantly to this kind of transmission of energy, while it can take some time for newcomers. She does not believe that she intentionally does anything special with her hands; the energy transmission just happens spontaneously.[99] After this brief explanation, Shakti Devi started chanting Lalitāsahasranāma, "the thousand names

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[98] Also called *kriyās*. *Kriyās* are involuntary external bodily signs such as shaking or jumping, or inner experiences such as visions and lights, caused by the ascension of the *kuṇḍalinī* energy. They are interpreted as a process of purification of the subtle body (Brooks and Rodhes Bailly 1997: 487–488).

[99] Field notes, (Tamil Nadu), 3.2.2004 and 5.2.2004.

of the goddess Lalitā," a *śākta* text which appears in the Lalitā Māhātmya, which itself is contained in Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa (43.9–14).

Two hours later, when the chanting was over and the *prasādam* had been distributed to everyone present, the people left with the exception of Shyam.[100] Shyam, who has been one of Shakti Devi's closest devotees since 1990, is in his forties and works full-time as a marketing executive in a biopharmaceutical company. He dedicates all his free time to Shakti Devi, providing her with whatever she needs, and spending most of his salary on "Amma," his guru. Shyam has not been initiated by Shakti Devi and does not consider himself to be a *brahmacāriṇ* but just calls himself *śiṣya*, disciple.[101] The first day of my visit, Shakti Devi insisted on my eating lunch with her, and after a conversation of about two hours she invited me to come to her home as a guest, visibly pleased to meet somebody sharing her spiritual interests. I immediately agreed to her invitation as it gave me a unique opportunity to ask her questions while being in her company most of the day, and thus to have access to special information related to her religious involvement. For a period of about two weeks, I stayed in a three-room apartment that belongs to her and is situated in the same compound as the apartment where she lives. That stay was followed by a second stay with her in January 2006.

After our lunch and the obligatory Indian siesta, Shakti Devi told me her life-story. Shakti Devi is in her fifties and comes from a Telugu-speaking family from Andhra Pradesh. She was born, however, in a large city in Tamil Nadu. After her college graduation, she started working in a state company. She married Ramesh and eventually gave birth to a son and a daughter.[102] The marriage was arranged, and as she says, she thought that whatever her parents would decide for her would be good. Now she believes that she was not mature enough for marriage, and when her children were three and seven years old, she told her husband that she wanted to leave him. One reason for her decision was the maltreatment she received from him. The other reason was that she had fallen in love with her guru. Shakti Devi's hus-

[100] Shyam is a pseudonym.
[101] Field notes, (Tamil Nadu), 20.2.2004.
[102] Ramesh is a pseudonym.

band agreed and she divorced, leaving the children in their father's care.[103]

Shakti Devi married her guru in the early 1980s and some time later, she resigned from her job after 15 years of government service in order to dedicate herself to spirituality. Her decision to remarry was taken after her guru had told her that she had been his wife in a previous birth.[104] She claims that, contrary to her first marriage, which was arranged, her second one was a "love marriage." Nowadays, and despite the fact that Shakti Devi and her husband are still married, the couple do not live together. "Svāmī," as Shakti Devi calls him, has his own temple where he usually conducts worship every morning, and an *āśram* located in a small apartment where he receives his close disciples in the afternoons and evenings.[105] *Svāmī* is surrounded by male attendants who assist him with practical and spiritual matters throughout the day.[106] During my first stay with Shakti Devi, *Svāmī* used to come to his wife's home by car daily. Both ate lunch together in her home, and after an afternoon nap, her husband used to take a taxi back to his home and come back some hours later for dinner and to sleep.[107] During my second visit in 2006, these routines had, however, changed.

According to Shakti Devi, her relationship to *Svāmī* is not devoid of tensions. Although Shakti Devi has an affectionate relationship with her husband, she says she is not accepted by her husband's devotees.[108] Another reason for her irritation is her husband's emotional withdrawal. She says she would like to share emotional and spiritual experiences with him but *Svāmī* claims not to understand her need for closeness. Shakti Devi and her husband have quarreled about this issue over the last twenty years. Although she claims to have accepted her destiny, she often returned to that question with bitter comments during my stay with her.[109]

In 1991, Shakti Devi had a profound religious experience that put her in altered states of consciousness. It started with a deep feeling of

[103] Field notes, (Tamil Nadu), 3.2.2004.
[104] Field notes, (Tamil Nadu), 5.2.2004.
[105] I am referring to Shakti Devi's husband as *Svāmī*.
[106] Field notes, (Tamil Nadu), 3.2.2004.
[107] Field notes, (Tamil Nadu), 5.2.2004.
[108] Field notes, (Tamil Nadu), 5.2.2004.
[109] Field notes, (Tamil Nadu), 5.2.2004.

inner connection with various goddesses, an experience depending, as she said, on her faith and devotion. More specifically, she claims that she received spiritual experiences from Māriyammaṉ. At that time, she spent much time conducting *pūjās*, singing *bhajans* for that specific goddess, and Shakti Devi believes that the goddess answered her prayers in her own way. In a dream, she saw a stone *mūrti* of Māriyammaṉ dressed in red clothes. For several weeks after that dream, she could sense a special odor of turmeric at 9:00 a.m. on Friday mornings.[110]

After her brother's death, she dived for the first time into states of *niścalasamādhi*, literally "*samādhi* without movement."[111] Her mind became still, and all kinds of fear and anger disappeared. She started experiencing mental clarity and love, followed by a desire to serve humanity.[112] That experience inspired her to resign from her job in order to dedicate herself full-time to spirituality. She started performing *pūjā*, chanting, and listening to people's problems with the sincere desire of helping them to ease their inner sufferings. Nowadays, she claims that though thoughts and worries still arise in her mind, she has the ability to still them immediately.[113]

Despite the powerfulness of that spiritual experience, Shakti Devi does not believe that it resulted in a state of permanent enlightenment. Instead, she considers herself to still be in the process of spiritual growth. That is one of the reasons why she does not want to call herself a guru. When she is in deep meditation, Shakti Devi says that her mind "jumps" into higher states of consciousness. It is nothing that she does at will; it just happens. Sometimes she hears sounds, sees lights, has visions, and smells wonderful odors. Moreover, when she meets spiritually awakened people, her mind "jumps" more than usual, and her heightened state gives people spiritual experiences of bliss. She also says that she can leave her body at will.[114]

Most of Shakti Devi's time is nowadays spent on a sofa in her home, waiting for devotees. The number of visitors who interact with her any given day is low and she estimates her followers to number about a few hundred people in total.[115] When I visited her, I saw only

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110 E-mail from Shakti Devi, 14.4.2004.
111 Field notes, (Tamil Nadu), 3.2.2004.
112 E-mail from Shakti Devi, 24.8.2005.
113 Field notes, (Tamil Nadu), 5.2.2004.
114 Field notes, (Tamil Nadu), 3.2.2004.
115 E-mail from Shakti Devi, 22.8.2005.

a few people gathered every day in the relatively small *pūjā* room of her apartment, with the exception of *pūjā*-evenings when the number of participants could reach thirty to forty people. The second reason why Shakti Devi does not want to call herself a guru is that she does not believe that she has disciples, or has anything to give to people. However, she welcomes anyone to spend time in her company, to share her prayers and spiritual fervor.[116] Nevertheless, followers acknowledge that they receive great benefits in her presence, such as mental clarity and peace of mind.

Several times a week, Shakti Devi attends different *pūjās* in other gurus' or devotees' homes. *Śākta* hymns such as Lalitāsahasranāma Stotraṃ and Lalitātriśatī Stotraṃ ("The three hundred names of the Goddess"), praising the divine attributes of the Goddess and very popular in South India, are chanted. One *pūjā* regularly performed during Indian festivals, and on special occasions such as marriage-ceremonies, is dedicated to the goddess Rājarājeśvarī. Rājarājeśvarī is frequently worshiped in the form of Mahāmeru through *arcana* where *kuṅkum* and flowers are offered to the goddess while sacred texts are recited.[117] After the recitation of the *stotras*, Shakti Devi sometimes delivers brief talks. However, she does not teach Vedantic principles or philosophical issues but prefers down-to-earth and practical approaches to spirituality. A theme such as "Family life and Spirituality" is typical of the kinds of the topics she usually discusses. Female *pūjās* are also regularly held in Shakti Devi's and her followers' homes. During my stay with her, I had the opportunity to participate in a *tiruviḷakku pūjā* or "worship of the holy oil lamp" performed by female followers in a devotee's home located in a village. The ceremony, which was led by a *brāhmaṇa* priest reciting the Lalitāsahasranāma, was performed by women who worshiped lamps symbolizing the goddess to promote their husbands' welfare, happiness, and long life.[118]

According to Shyam, Shakti Devi's main task is not to teach yoga in a traditional way, such as by lecturing or teaching meditation. Instead she gives people a spiritual experience through *dīkṣā*, as I witnessed during my first visit when Shakti Devi transmitted spiritual power by

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116 Field notes, (Tamil Nadu), 5.2.2004.

117 *Arcana* is a devotional south Indian worship offered to the deity with flowers, *kuṅkum* or saffron.

118 Field notes, (Tamil Nadu), 6.2.2004.

directing her right hand towards the visitors' heads.[119] As I observed several times, people usually react strongly to her *dīkṣā* sessions: some jump involuntarily, make spontaneous *mudrās*, breathe deeply, laugh, or fall on the ground.[120] Shyam says that receiving Amma's energy can be done in a very natural way anywhere and at any time, even when she is not present. He relates that just thinking of Shakti Devi can be enough to pull him into altered states of consciousness. That transmission of energy might take place when he is at work or in his home, and when it happens, he says, his body is subjected to different involuntary movements. Once, when he was traveling by bus, it went so far that he fell on the floor and was injured.[121]

Shakti Devi says with a sigh that most people do not come to her for spiritual reasons but for material benefits such as getting a job, money, or a husband for a daughter. Other followers come in order to get strong yogic experiences such as *kuṇḍalinī* kicks, or to obtain occult powers (*siddhis*). However, she thinks that true seekers are very rare. She also says that when people come to her with their problems, she never answers their worldly questions. Instead she tries to give them comfort with a promise of prayers she will recite for them.[122]

Shakti Devi claims not to be interested in building an *āśram*. The financial issues involved in such an enterprise are not the sole reason. According to her, an *āśram* is like a home; it needs to be administrated, and presupposes that the guru take great responsibilities. Shakti Devi does not want to deal with such practical duties. As she puts it, she does not even cook her food at home. "If I spend hours making food, who will take care of my devotees?" she asks.[123] Sometimes she gets food from devotees, but most of the time, she buys ready-made food from a devotee who owns a vegetarian restaurant. Shyam brings a *tiffin*-carrier with lunch meals cooked by that devotee most days before going to his office.[124] During my stay with her, Shakti Devi, Shyam, and I went together to a restaurant in the surroundings twice, an unusual behavior for an Indian guru.

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[119] Field notes, (Tamil Nadu), 20.2.2004.
[120] Field notes, (Tamil Nadu), 3.2.2004.
[121] Field notes, (Tamil Nadu), 20.2.2004.
[122] Field notes, (Tamil Nadu), 3.2.2004.
[123] Field notes, (Tamil Nadu), 3.2.2004.
[124] Field notes, (Tamil Nadu), 3.2.2004.

# III – Female Guruhood in a Social Setting

In order to explore the phenomenon of Indian female guruhood and spiritual leadership in contemporary Hinduism within the framework of the personal guru-career, my purpose in the two following chapters is to focus upon female gurus' growth into holiness. My main concern is the religious context surrounding the seventy women included in the present study as well as the deeds and behaviors they display. Questions asked are, among others: Who are these female gurus? How did they come to dedicate themselves to full-time spirituality? Does the socioreligious context of their culture predispose certain of them to becoming spiritual masters? How do their families and followers respond to trance states, inner voices, and visions? Did these women possess exceptionally heightened spirituality already from an early age, and exhibit particular abilities beyond the ordinary? Or can we find both cultural and personal factors that interact in framing the choices they make when it comes to religion?

In the present chapter, I am mainly concerned with the interaction between the spiritual aspirant and society, because whenever it took place, the call to holiness found the individual in a social setting. The impact of social, cultural, psychological, and spiritual factors that can influence a person's personality, perceptions, behavior, aptitudes, inclinations, choices, and decision-making of man have been investigated extensively in scholarship, and have been given different weight depending on the perspective adopted. Whereas sociologists emphasize the impact of socialization on people's basic inclinations, and anthropologists point out the influence of cultural environment, psychologists focus upon the role of individual convictions that underly personal striving and the choice of a personal career. As we will see in the present and following chapter, female gurus' own perceptions differ greatly from these views.

I start by examining the gurus' socioreligious background, as the social setting appears to be the first context in which the religious impulse was manifested. This will be followed by Chapter IV profiling female gurus' upbringing, and portraying their spiritual growth and personal choices from their own perspective. In the present chapter, and for practical reasons, I have chosen to focus more specifically

upon five factors constituting the socioreligious environment of these women which might have influenced the choice and/or nature of their full-time spiritual involvement: *varṇa* background; education; place of birth and geographical mobility; parents' religiosity; and the impact of Ramakrishna, Sharada Devi, and *svāmī* Vivekananda's achievements. The foremost reason for focusing upon these five different factors is that they frequently figure in the women's life-narratives. Hence, one can assume that they might have been highly formative in terms of shaping their personality and choice of spiritual orientation, and of influencing and promoting their role and position as spiritual leaders. Another reason for my choice is that, as far as I am aware, environmental factors related to female guruhood have not previously been examined in Hindu studies. It goes without saying that these five factors are intimately interrelated and therefore can not always be dissociated from each other neatly.

## 1. "Caste" background

One issue related to female guruhood, which so far has received very little attention in scholarship, revolves around "caste" background. Whereas Katherine and Charles H. George have made some useful observations about the relationship between the spiritual and social elites in their pioneering macroscopic study on Christianity, a similar study focusing upon Hinduism has so far not been undertaken.[125] As noted in the introduction, social and cultural elements related to the gurus' lives are given minimal significance by gurus and devotees. Accordingly, the issue of "caste" is never emphasized, nor hardly even mentioned, but rather downplayed in all the *āśrams* I have visited and in all the gurus' teachings I have come in contact with. Getting access to information about "caste" was therefore quite problematic.

All the female gurus in my study, as well as most male spiritual masters, reject "caste" differences, preaching that spirituality is beyond "castes" and creeds. The idea of non-duality, or the oneness or unity of all things, modeled on *advaita vedānta*, the philosophy of absolute monism propounded by Śaṅkara in the ninth century, is that all

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[125] Katherine and Charles H. George, "Roman Catholic Sainthood and Social Status: A Statistical and Analytical Study," *The Journal of Religion*, vol. 35, No. 2, April 1955, 85–98.

kinds of duality should be transcended, considering differences of "high" and "low" to only be mere products of the mind and as belonging to *māyā* or illusion. This state of oneness is not only a matter of philosophy; it is experienced by gurus and associated with the state of permanent enlightenment they are supposed to have achieved.

The belief that spirituality is beyond "castes" and creeds, and that social position has no relevance to salvation means that all people, irrespective of social, political, or religious background, are welcome to join *āśrams* and to become followers of gurus, having in that way equal access to spirituality. Another factor playing down the significance of "caste" in religious contexts is embedded in the very nature of spiritual renunciation. Renunciation, a term closely associated with *tyāga*, from Sanskrit *tyāg* meaning literally "to abnegate," or being dead to the past, presupposes qualities such as humility and egolessness.

A third significant factor which might explain why the issue of "caste" is downplayed is related to the impact of *bhakti*, *tantra* and śāktism, which deliberately reverse the hierarchy between "high" and "low," and color in varying degrees the spiritual orientation of most gurus. Whereas the followers of *tantra* and śāktism believe that duality can be transcended by transgressing purity restrictions, the proponents of *bhakti* are urged to downplay the issue of "caste". A fourth factor suggested by Karen Pechilis might depend on the notion of inner purity being linked with the belief that gurus embody divinity. Hagiographical accounts stress the purity of female gurus, which is expressed in their representations as perfected beings. This quality is believed to be inherent and as such, contrasts with the purity of "caste" owned by inheritance (Pechilis 2004a: 8).

## 1.1 "Caste" or *varṇa*

According to scholars such as Bouglé, Indian society is divided into different hereditary groups which are hierarchized, specialized, and separated in relation to each other (Bouglé 1958: 4). That idea is taken up by Louis Dumont and explained in the following way:

> The caste system divides the whole society into a large number of hereditary groups, distinguished from one another and connected together by three characteristics:

> *separation* in matters of marriage and contact, whether direct or indirect (food); *division* of labour, each group having, in theory or by tradition, a profession from which the members can depart only within certain limits; and finally *hierarchy*, which ranks the groups as relatively superior or inferior to one another. (Dumont 1970a: 21)

According to Dumont, Indian "caste" or, more exactly, *varṇa* structure is a complex social system resting on the complementary relationships between ritually pure (*śauca*) and ritually impure (*aśauca*), where the pure is regarded as superior to the impure (Dumont 1970a: 43; 48–49). It is intrinsically bound up with everyday activities such as eating, drinking, bathing, talking, and physical interaction.[126]

The *varṇa* model makes a distinction between four categories according to the following scheme: *brāhmaṇas*, usually translated as "priesthood" or *varṇa* of learned people; *kṣatriyas*, warriors and nobles; *vaiśyas* farmers, merchants; *śūdras*, servants serving the three other *varṇas*.[127] There is also a fifth category outside the traditional fourfold *varṇa* classification: the category of *avarṇas* or *aspṛśyas*, so-called "untouchables," also called *dalits* ("oppressed") by the people themselves, or *harijans*, "sons of Hari," the latter word having been introduced by Mahatma Gandhi. According to the *varṇa* model, the *brāhmaṇas* are believed to top the religious hierarchy, enjoying privileges and occupying a high ritual status, while the untouchables have low ritual status.

With such a background in mind, my study indicates that a majority of the seventy investigated women whose *varṇa* I have been able to identify have *brāhmaṇa* origins.[128] Moreover, and although I have no

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126 For rules related to caste and food, see Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, Chapter 6, pp. 130–151; for rules related to caste and marriage, see Chapter 5, pp. 109–129.

127 Life was divided into *āśramas* or stages of life ideally meant for men belonging to the first three castes of the fourfold caste system (*dvijas* or twice-born). The first stage was studentship (*brahmacarya*) under a teacher. In his early teens, the young man was supposed to marry, thus entering the householdership-stage (*gṛhastha*). When he was approaching old age, he was supposed to retire to the forest and meditate (*vānaprastha*) and at the last stage (*sannyāsa*), he renounced the world completely to devote himself to God.

128 See Appendix 2.

The predominance of the social elite among holy people is also reflected in Katherine and Charles H. George's study of 2494 male and female Roman Catholic saints through centuries. Statistics indicate that while five percent of saints were members of the lower class and seventeen percent were members of the middle class, not less than seventy eight percent were upper-class (George 1955: 86).

concrete evidence for my claim, I have good reason to believe that at least ten additional women among my sample of seventy women were born into *brāhmaṇa* families.

Out of thirty four (34) women whose *varṇa* affiliation can be discerned, twenty two (22) are *brāhmaṇas*. Two gurus come from *kṣatriya* families: Mother Meera (1960–) from Andhra Pradesh and Mata Krishna (ca. 1929–) from Lahore, Pakistan; one is *vaiśya*: Shakti Devi from Tamil Nadu; three are *śūdras*: Shobha Ma (1921–) from Varanasi, Shyama Ma (1916–1999) from Vrindavan, and Mata Amritanandamayi (1953–) from Kerala. This short survey thus indicates that more than two out of three women top the *varṇa* hierarchy while only three of them do not have twice-born (*dvija*) status.[129]

Moreover, seven of the seventy gurus of this study claim to issue from a "noble," "royal," or "aristocratic" family. This category is not easy to classify given that noble, royal, and aristocratic people might not only have *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya*, or *brāhmaṇa* origins but also *śūdra* background. Radhikananda Saraswati (1948–) has a *brāhmaṇa* and noble background. Among the women presented in Chapter II, Madhobi Ma who claims to have both royal and *brāhmaṇa* origins, is also such an example.[130]

The information that most female gurus have a *brāhmaṇa* background, thus belonging to a religious elite, was surprising to me at first given that during my daily interaction with them, I could never discern any prominent signs of their "upper-caste" affiliation. Most of the women behave in a very humble manner, dressing modestly, leading an austere life without personal belongings, discarding status and fame, and never making any fuss about their *brāhmaṇa* background. One should, however, keep in mind that along with their decision to embrace an ascetic way of life, they have rejected "caste" and status, and thus were behaving accordingly.

Not surprisingly, *brāhmaṇas* have traditionally been perceived as representing spiritual knowledge and have therefore always been considered the foremost representatives of Hindu religion. According-

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[129] See Appendix 2. Among the four women presented in Chapter II, Madhobi Ma comes from a royal and *brāhmaṇa* family, Shakti Devi from a *vaiśya* sub-caste, Sai Rajarajeshvari from a *brāhmaṇa* family, and according to unconfirmed sources, Anandmurti Gurumaa might come from a *kṣatriya* family.

[130] Field notes, Delhi, 30.10.2001.

ly, embracing teaching roles as spiritual leaders is largely consonant with *brāhmaṇa* ideology and the *brāhmaṇa* context from which most religious specialists, such as priests, traditionally were, and still are found.[131] Although female religious specialists, by tradition, have never had extensive access to religious leadership, in that their religious role has mainly been confined to domestic rituals, and although there were even times when legal texts excluded women from religious participation, it is interesting to find so many contemporary *brāhmaṇa* women embracing the path of guruhood.

A factor which might somewhat modify these findings must, however, be taken into consideration. As mentioned in the introduction, the fact that the group of seventy women investigated in the present study is relatively homogeneous in terms of *varṇa* affiliation might be partly explained by the ways through which it has been selected. It seems likely that my background as a well-educated, English speaking, and by Indian standards, "well-to-do" westerner has made me more prone to come in contact with "high-caste" informants and gurus than I otherwise would have done. [132]

Whereas Dumont's opposition between pure and impure has proven to be convenient and useful as structuring principle of the *varṇa* system, that notion has been challenged by a different and nonhierarchical "axis of value" through the categories of auspiciousness (*śubha* and *śuddha*) and inauspiciousness (*aśubha* and *aśuddha*) (Apffel Marglin 1985a: 40).[133] As Lynn Teskey Denton puts it, "Auspiciousness or inauspiciousness can invert a person's status as defined by conventional pure-impure criteria" (Teskey Denton 2004: 35). She claims, for example, that whereas a highly impure prostitute is regarded as auspicious, a chaste widow is considered inauspicious (*amaṅgalī*) (Teskey Denton 2004: 35). Similarly, marriage makes a Hindu woman who is

[131] That started changing in the twentieth century when an ever growing number of women have been allowed to become *pūjarīs*.

[132] The problem of selection of research objects which might distort the results is mentioned by Katherine and Charles H. George. They comment the predominance of upper class people among the Christian saints of their study as follows:

"[…] the apologetic interest of early Christianity lead to a disproportionate emphasis on the deeds and virtues of those relatively few Christians in the infant years of the faith who were of good birth or high station. These names are noted, remembered, and recorded, whereas the names of a large number of humble believers who sacrificed perhaps equally for their faith tend to be lost in the anonymity which has always shrouded the mass of men" (George 1955: 87).

[133] For a discussion of the terms *śubha*, *śuddha*, *aśubha*, and *aśuddha*, see Madan 1988: 51–58.

inferior in status an auspicious perfect wife, a *sumaṅgalī*, symbolized by the goddess Lakṣmī epitomizing "goodness, prosperity, well-being, health, happiness, and creativity" (Fuller 2004: 22). Auspiciousness is related to the accumulation of *śakti*, or female spiritual power, believed to be generated through virtuous deeds and physical, emotional, and/or mental restraint.

Partly because of its association with sexual restraint, celibacy, at least for males, is also considered auspicious.[134] As such, it challenges notions of purity/impurity related to *varṇa*, as the example of Amritanandamayi illustrates. Amritanandamayi comes from a poor family belonging to a fishing community (*araya*), from Kerala. The *araya* members are ritually located between the *vaiśyas* and *śūdras*, but are regarded as *śūdras*.[135] Despite her "low-caste" and low social background, Amritanandamayi has succeeded in becoming the most well-known female guru in today's India, attracting a huge following all over the world. Her success can partly be understood as due to her ascetic mode of living in which severe spiritual austerities (*tapas*) have been part of her daily routines since childhood.[136]

## 2. Education

When examining the educational factor among female gurus, my material reveals that the level of literacy differs significantly between women born in the 1800s or the first decades of the nineteenth century and women born later. Whereas those in the first category tend to be uneducated or only to have received a lower level of education, most of the women in the second category have not only taken part in higher education, but have quite frequently even completed a college degree. The distinction is, of course, very rough, and there are exceptions in both groups, but the tendency is still significant. This observation is probably not particularly surprising given that until very recently, it was primarily or exclusively men who had access to literacy.

In past generations, education was not a common option for Indian women in general, especially for those living in rural areas, from poor

[134] The issue of celibacy will be examined more extensively in Chapter VI.

[135] E-mail from Mira, 5.12.2008. Mira is one of Amritanandamayi's female disciples living at Amritapuri *āśram*, and is responsible for checking all information concerning Amritanandamayi.

[136] One such *tapas* which started in early adulthood is her never ending *darśans* where she might hug devotees during nearly twenty hours at a stretch without leaving her seat.

families, and coming from "high-caste" families. In rural communities, there was, and still is, reluctance on the part of parents to educate their daughters. Poor families could not afford to send girls to school. Though education was free of charge, girls were needed at home to help their families with domestic chores such as cooking, cleaning, taking care of siblings, and fetching water. Furthermore, it was thought that educating girls brought no returns to parents as the daughter was meant to be "married off" as soon as possible.

Among the female gurus from past generations included in my study, a few uneducated women can be found. Aghorimani Devi (1822–1906), Yogin Ma (1851–1934), Lakshmimani Devi (1864–1926) and Golap Ma (1840s–1924), all Ramakrishna's head-disciples, received very little education (Chetanananda 1989). Anandamayi Ma (1896–1982) only had a primary-school education. All of them were from West Bengal and *brāhmaṇas*.

One of the major reasons for the dismal level of education might have to do with the impact of the *pardā*-practice, or seclusion (lit. "curtain",) which ruled many women's lives in the past centuries. *Pardā* was introduced during Muslim rule after the twelfth century and had a strong impact on Indian society (Young 1987: 87). The observance of *pardā* could include the practice of veiling the face, but more generally was characterized by the observance of physical seclusion for women. This implied that women rarely left their residence and had to cover their face while traveling. In the life at royal courts, for example, sexual segregation was usual and men and women lived in separate areas. The practice of *pardā* was linked to concepts of female modesty and family honor. Traditionally, *pardā*-restrictions were stronger in "high-caste" families than in "low-caste" families. It was believed that education outside the home leading to association with strangers left a young woman vulnerable and exposed to immoral influences. Women's virginity had to be protected, given that the role of parents was to deliver a chaste girl to the future husband's family. The only education received by young women was meant to prepare them to their future role as wives and mothers. Accordingly, a majority of "high-caste" women were not well educated.

Another central and presumably even more significant reason for the dismal level of education among the female gurus of past generations cited above might have to do with the region from which the

women came, namely West Bengal. Like Bangladesh, West Bengal had one of the lowest literacy levels of South Asia.

The practice of *pardā* entailed that from past generations until recently, it was not unusual for home-tutors to teach young ladies in wealthy families. Among the women in the present study, Krishna Ma (1939–1999), a *brāhmaṇa* from Mathura, known as Kṛṣṇa's birthplace, received her education at home with a tutor during a period of five years.[137] This was also the case for Indira Betiji (1939–), born into a wealthy *brāhmaṇa* family from Gujurat, who studied the Vedas and *upaniṣads* at home with a *paṇḍit* (Melwani 1997: 27). The *pardā* practice was not always related to *varṇa* affiliation but was sometimes part of the regional context. Like Krishna Ma, Shyama Ma (1926–1999) was born in Mathura but came from a poor *śūdra vaiṣṇava* family. As part of Mathura culture, Shyama Ma had to observe *pardā* when strangers came to her in-law's home. Shyama Ma's in-laws received monks frequently in their home and the spiritually inclined Shyama was very eager to discuss spiritual topics with them. However, as a young female, she refrained from talking to them, fearing the disapproval of her mother-in-law (Jalan 1977: 18). The author of her hagiography mentions that Shyama Ma married at eleven, but reveals nothing about her education. It is likely that living in the conservative *vaiṣṇava* environment of Mathura, the practice of *pardā* was a matter of course, but that the family's economic situation did not allow for providing home education for their daughter.

*Pardā*-restrictions are still widespread in rural settings, more particularly in federal states of North India such as Rajasthan but are tending to diminish gradually. Among the urban and rural elite, the practice has disappeared and female education is promoted.[138] Whereas female modesty and chastity are values still held in high esteem, women have far greater mobility, access to public space, and freedom of social interaction than before. In her monograph, *Women in Religions: In Search of Community, Sexuality and Spiritual Power*, Elizabeth Puttick claims that Indian female gurus, past and present, lack formal education, being "poorly educated or illiterate, like the majority of Indian women," thus contrasting with male gurus who are "often

[137] Interview with Trikoli Nath in Mathura (Uttar Pradesh), 5.11.2000.

[138] http://www.country-studies.com/india/veiling-and-seclusion-of-women.htlm

highly educated" (Puttick 1997: 187). I definitely do not agree with that generalization, at least as regards the women of the present study living today.

Due to the disappearance of *pardā*-restrictions and the fact that the women generally come from urban settings, my material indicates that most of them belong to middle-class families with good incomes, and that education and employment outside the home are highly encouraged. Accordingly, most of the gurus in my study are well educated, many having undertaken college studies. Among the seventy women in the present study whose educational background could be identified, a majority of them have applied themselves to college studies, completing a Bachelor's or a Master's degree, and in one case, a PhD degree.[139] Among the four women presented in Chapter II, Shakti Devi received a Bachelor of Science degree in Mathematics, Anandmurti Gurumaa completed a Bachelor's degree, and Rajarajeshwari was involved in "college studies."

My material also indicates that some women chose spirituality early in life and have therefore received a traditional *gurukula* education during childhood and/or adolescence. *Gurukula* (from *guru* and *kula*, "family," lit. "guru's family") is an ancient institution established in Vedic times. *Gurukula* education used to take place at the guru's house where young people, predominantly "high-caste" males, used to study for a period of time. The education included many subjects such as the study of holy texts, and the practice of self-inquiry under the guru's guidance. While the task of the guru was to impart knowledge, the student's duty was to help the guru with menial chores such as washing clothes, cleaning, cooking, fetching wood, etc.

The old tradition of *gurukula* education has undergone a revival and is now part of many *āśrams* of the present day, where compulsory topics such as Mathematics, English, and History are taught alongside spiritual ones. Among the women in the present study, Godavari Ma (1914–1990) from Maharashtra received such a *gurukula* education. When she was nine years old, she was admitted to the *āśram* where she received rigorous training in Vedic rituals, Sanskrit language, *śāstras* (holy texts), music, crafts and drawing. After the death of her

[139] See the table at the end of this monograph. Guru Ma Jyotishanand Saraswati received a doctorate in Indian Astrology.

guru, Upasani Baba, himself Shirdi Sai Baba's disciple, Godavari Ma became the head of the *Kanya-Kumari-Sthan* in 1941. Another guru who was educated in a *gurukula* is Gurumayi (1955–) from Maharashtra, now leading the *Siddha Yoga* movement. She studied with her guru in her teens at the *āśram* of Ganeshpuri while doing *sādhana* (Durgananda 1997: 65).

There is another interesting factor related to educational background which might have had an impact on the making of female gurus. While scrutinizing my material, I found that a number of women included in my sample of seventy gurus have received education at Indian Christian educational institutions. These schools were established during British Rule. Among the four women profiled in Chapter II, Madhobi Ma received her education at home with a tutor, while Shakti Devi, Sai Rajarajeshwari, and Anandmurti Gurumaa were educated at Christian schools. It is easy to imagine that the contact with other cultures and worldviews at an early age might have contributed broadening the minds and inspiring their later international spiritual involvement.

## 3. Place of birth, geographic mobility, and religious environment

Another interesting factor related to the background of female gurus has to do with geographic mobility. My material indicates that most of the women do not conduct their religious activities at their place of birth and that interstate migration is quite common. The seventy women in the present study are scattered across all of India, with the exception of some federal states such as Bihar and Orissa, and a few of them reside in western countries such as the USA, Canada, and Germany. Among the four women presented in Chapter II, Madhobi Ma of Delhi is originally from Bengal; Sai Rajarajeshwari of Mysore (Karnataka) was born in Mangalore (Karnataka); and Anandmurti Gurumaa of Gannaur (Haryana) was born in Amritsar (Panjab). The only guru who still lives at her birthplace, but whose parents were born in Andhra Pradesh, is Shakti Devi from Tamil Nadu. While looking more closely at the issue of geographic mobility, I noticed that this factor had more relevance than it appeared to have at first sight in terms of understanding female gurus' social background, and more

specifically in terms of making sense of their spiritual orientation/affiliation.

Geographic mobility, the movement of individuals between different cities, federal states, or countries, is a relatively widespread phenomenon in Indian society, at least among people from an urban environment (as most gurus are). Female gurus are no exception to that rule, and my material suggests that geographic mobility among the women in the present study mainly depends on three factors: the parents' professional obligations, political reasons, and the spiritual quest.

There are plenty of examples of labor mobility among my sample of seventy gurus. Note that labor mobility is never a question of labor immigration, but an opportunity to obtain attractive, relatively well-remunerated jobs, or financial advancement within a present employment. One such example is found in Sai Rajarajeshwari's life-story presented in Chapter II. Sai Rajarajeshwari was born in Mangalore (Karnataka) and when she was a few years old, her parents were transferred to Bangalore (Karnataka) because of her father's employment. As already mentioned, she currently resides in Mysore (Karnataka) where she has founded an *āśram*.

A second factor related to geographical mobility has to do with politics. Among the women in the present study, we found several cases of gurus whose families had to move in 1947 when the subcontinent was partitioned in the wake of the independence of India. That was, for example, the case for Anandmurti Gurumaa presented in Chapter II, whose family migrated from the city of Gujranwala, nowadays situated in Pakistan, to Amritsar (Punjab). It was also the case for Indira Devi (ca. 1920–1998) and for Krishna Ma (1939–1999) from Vrindavan, born in Lahore (Pakistan).

Another recurring theme among the women in the present study is that at some point in their lives, some of them have chosen to move from their family homes for spiritual reasons. They might have chosen to leave their place of birth and settle down in holy cities in order to interact with like-minded people, to come closer to their own spiritual master, or to spread the word outside the country. Cities such as Varanasi, Rishikesh, and Haridvar, have for centuries exerted a strong attraction among spiritual people for their proximity to the Ganges, as have Mathura and Vrindavan for their association with Kṛṣṇa. Anan-

damayi Ma, Ganga Ma, and Shobha Ma are examples of women who left Bengal to settle down and/or established *āśrams* in holy cities. Ganga Ma and Shobha Ma (1921–) moved to Varanasi permanently. Although Anandamayi Ma roamed around between holy places all her life, she established an *āśram* in Varanasi, and her head *āśram* was located in Kankhal outside Haridvar (Uttarakhand). Moreover, being considered as the embodiment of goddesses, rivers such as Godavari, Sarasvati, and Yamuna are attractive to spiritually inclined people. Sai Rajarajeshwari from Karnataka, for example, chose to establish her *āśram* by the South Indian Kaveri river which is considered particularly holy.

A wish to come close to one's own spiritual master is another reason given for moving away from one's birthplace. Sharada (1959–), later known as Mathru Sri Sharada, was born in Gudur (Andhra Pradesh) (Godman 1986: 113). When Sharada was fifteen years old, her parents' guru, Lakshmana *svāmī*, a man loosely associated with Ramana Maharshi, came out of his isolation and started giving *darśans* regularly. She met the guru at his *āśram* in Tiruvannamalai (Tamil Nadu), a visit which came to be followed by many others. Her first encounter with Lakshmana *svāmī* made such a great impression on Sharada that she started doing *japa*, repeating his name intensively (Godman 1986: 115–116). Over time, Sharada's devotion increased and her longing to be in the presence of her guru permanently in order to achieve enlightenment intensified after each visit. Finally, four years after her first encounter with Lakshmana *svāmī*, she is said to have achieved self-realization (Godman 1986: 172). Since then, she has lived in Tiruvannamalai in her guru's *āśram*. Although she does not like publicity, she has taken on the role of guru for a few followers, giving small, informal *darśans* in the evenings, delivering lectures, conducting *bhajans*, and performing *pūjās*.[140]

My material indicates that another reason for moving from one place to another is the guru's command to a disciple to teach in a specific spot. In Chapter II, we saw how a few gurus started to settle down in Western countries to teach spirituality to westerners after India's independence from British rule 1947. Siddheshvari Devi (ca. 1960–) affectionately known as Didiji ("Revered sister"), is one of

140 Field notes, Tiruvannamalai (Tamil Nadu), 15.11.1999.

them. Siddheshvari Devi was born in India and moved to Canada with her parents when she was thirteen years old. After having earned a college degree in languages in Canada, she realized that she was not meant for an academic career or a life as a householder. She went back to India, found a guru, and after some years of training her guru, Kripalu Maharaj, sent her back to Western countries to spread spiritual knowledge. Since 1987, she has been touring in the US, Canada, West Indies, and Asia, delivering lectures and counseling people.[141] Shree Ma from Kamakhya and Gurani Anjali are other examples of female gurus who settled down in the USA to spread the word after their guru's command.

There are two main reasons why I find an examination of the gurus' place of birth relevant for the present study. First, it clarifies why certain religious elements are found in some of the women's religious environments in areas where they would not be expected to be encountered. Although Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh is known to be the abode of Śiva, it has for generations been a center of Bengali culture, what Catherine Clémentin-Ojha calls a "little Bengal" (Clémentin-Ojha 1990: 106). Some female gurus from West Bengal, and more specifically from Kolkata, who grew up in a *śākta* environment where goddess worship is central, eventually came to settle down in northern and western Indian cities such as Haridvar and Varanasi. According to Lynn Teskey Denton, more than eighty percent of the female ascetics of Varanasi come from Bengal or from Nepal where goddess worship is also central (Teskey Denton 2004: 119). Given that *śākta* ideology dominates Bengali spirituality, it is not surprising to find strong *śākta* elements permeating the beliefs and rituals of the gurus residing in Varanasi. In the case of the Bengali woman Madhobi Ma who settled down in Delhi, we have previously seen that she claims not only to have a *śākta* orientation but also to be a *śākta* guru in her own right.

Second, and according to research from 1971, there is evidence that labor mobility in India "tends to increase with increased education and tends to be away from low-income states towards higher income states" (Greenwood 1971: 137). This can be illustrated by one of Lynn Teskey Denton's assumptions, namely that the reason why so many

[141] http://www.divinelovemission.org/dlm/INTRO_SD.HTM

Bengali women live in Varanasi is that they were the first women of India to profit from social reforms carried out during British rule. As such, they have had access to education and the freedom to choose their own lives to a larger extent than other women (Teskey Denton 2004: 119–120). It can be said in passing that these few, but pertinent, claims further reinforce the picture of the female gurus' social backgrounds as being relatively wealthy.

Looking at the spiritual environment surrounding female gurus during childhood and adolescence, my material also indicates that most of the women were familiar with religiosity already from early childhood. Most of the hagiographical and biographical accounts relate how the women grew up in highly religious surroundings and came in contact with devotional activities very early in life, and that pious parents were a source of inspiration for them. Going on pilgrimages, visiting temples, performing *pūjās* regularly, mingling with spiritually inclined or saintly people, visiting the family home, as well as having access to spiritual role models through the epics orally narrated to the child by parents and grand-parents are frequently mentioned in biographical and hagiographical accounts.

Turning to the women presented in Chapter II, hagiographical sources indicate that spiritually inclined people often assembled at Sai Rajarajeshwari's family home, and that well-known male gurus such as Bhagwan Sri Shridhara Swamy of Varadahalli and *svāmī* Ramdas from Kanhangad used to pay visits to her parents' home on a regular basis (*SSRS* 1999: 48; 54). Shakti Devi describes her parents as highly spiritual and a source of inspiration for her. Her mother used to sing devotional songs and tell her stories from the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata. Moreover, her aunt used to recite the Viṣṇusahasranāma frequently in her presence.[142] She had great admiration for her father who brought her to different saints and *yogīs* for *darśan*, such as Shivabalayogi and Jillellamudi Amma. Shakti Devi's father encouraged his daughter's spiritual faith by telling her stories about saints and imparting philosophical insights from the Bhagavadgītā and the *upaniṣads*. When she listened to him, Shakti Devi could feel a soft "wind" blowing above the *sahasrāra*. She also felt a power inside her body "pushing her upwards." At that time, she did not know what it was

[142] E-mails from Shakti Devi, 22.8.2005 and 24.8.2005.

and did not dare to share that experience with her father. Eventually, she learned that it had to do with *kuṇḍalinī* awakening.[143]

With these few last examples in mind, it could be interesting to reflect upon whether or not the parents' religious environment has been decisive for their daughters' choice of a spiritual career. Anandmurti Gurumaa, presented in Chapter II, has a clear opinion about that issue. She claims that on the "mortal plane," home environment does have an impact on the psyche of a person, especially of a child, because the mind of a child is untouched, and thus is ready to receive all kinds of impressions. However, she thinks that people can grow up in very different environments which might not have any impact "at all" on what they are today. [144]

Anandmurti Gurumaa claims that she comes from a very normal Indian family, with a father working outside the home, a mother who was a housewife, and siblings doing what siblings are supposed to do, i.e., "quarrelling, learning, going to schools, being with friends."[145] However, while she acknowledges that she grew up in highly spiritual surroundings, and that holy people and *mahātmās* came and visited her family home regularly, she does not believe that it had a decisive impact on her choice of a spiritual career. She emphasizes that, at that time, she was already living in her own spiritual world: "The important thing is what you are" she says. "When you are living already in your own world and your feet are very much grounded in the ground of truth, then, [the spiritual environment] does not matter at all."[146] Moreover, she claims that whereas her brother, sister, and she shared the same religious environment, she was the only one of them who chose to embrace full-time spirituality and celibacy.[147] Shakti Devi has had a similar experience; none of her brothers or sisters being particularly spiritually inclined. What Anandmurti Gurumaa and Shakti Devi thus suggest is that strong spiritual inclinations do not depend on the impact of the spiritual environment but are innate and individual. Nor do female gurus agree with the idea that exceptionally favorable social origins would have been decisive for embrac-

[143] Field notes, (Tamil Nadu), 25.2.2006.
[144] Interview with Anandmurti Gurumaa in Gannaur (Haryana), 21.1.2006.
[145] Interview with Anandmurti Gurumaa in Gannaur (Haryana), 21.1.2006.
[146] Interview with Anandmurti Gurumaa in Gannaur (Haryana), 21.1.2006.
[147] Interview with Anandmurti Gurumaa in Gannaur (Haryana), 21.1.2006.

ing a monastic life-style as a female. Although Jnanananda Sarasvathi (1929–) was born into a matrilineal family from Kerala, she does not believe that this has had any significance at all for her vocation and position as spiritual leader.[148]

## 4. The impact of Ramakrishna, Sharada Devi, and Vivekananda

Due to the lack of centralization characterizing Hinduism, there are no completely unified religious movements, which might explain why the establishment of an order of nuns never took place as it did in Buddhism. Gurus usually establish their own religious activities from an inner calling, independently of others, and generally appear to have only poor knowledge of each other's existence. In other words, their religious involvement seems at first sight to be highly individualistic. It was therefore surprising to me to realize that one of the main sources of inspiration for most of the female *gurus* and/or their families, irrespective of social background, ethnic, regional, or religious affiliation, educational level, or rural or urban context are Ramakrishna, his wife Sharada Devi, and their follower *svāmī* Vivekananda, all born in West Bengal. When referring to role-models and main source of religious inspiration during childhood and adolescence, unusually many gurus mentioned the three Bengali gurus, alongside famous female medieval saints such as Mīrābāī from Rajasthan, Lalleśvarī from Kashmir, Akkamahādēvi from Karnataka, and Āṇṭāḷ from Tamil Nadu. My observation is in line with Agehananda Bharati who claims that "Modern Hindus derive their knowledge of Hinduism from Vivekananda, directly or indirectly" (Bharati 1970b: 278). The impact of Ramakrishna, Sharada Devi, and Vivekananda thus proved to be far more significant than I initially could imagine and it obviously still has repercussions in Hindu life today.

Ramakrishna (1836–1886), Sharada Devi (1853–1920) and Vivekananda (1863–1902) lived in times when India was under British rule. During a fifteen-year period of intense *sādhana*, the highly mystical Ramakrishna practiced different kinds of yogic techniques and experimented with Christian and Islamic worship. From his mystical expe-

148 Field notes, Chennai (Tamil Nadu), 29.10.1999. The name "Mother Jnanananda" is used by Charles White (see bibliography).

riences, he drew the conclusion that all spiritual paths were of the same value in the quest for God (Neevel 1987: 210). Ramakrishna's message of the universality of all world religions was carried on to Western countries by his disciple Vivekananda. In 1893, Vivekananda delivered a famous lecture at *The Parliament of Religions in Chicago*, putting Hinduism on the map of the world for the first time. Vivekananda's message was double-edged: on the one hand, to propagate the idea of universal brotherhood, but at the same time, to take a stand against Western religious imperialism whose goal was to assert the superiority of Christianity.

Vivekananda's ability to articulate his message on the universality of religions beyond superstitions and sectarian disputes, his persuasive eloquence, enthusiasm, dynamism, creative might, and energy, and unceasing activity, had a profound appeal to most Hindus. His initiative was especially welcomed at a time when British missionaries were eager to convert Indians to Christianity and has contributed to giving him and his successors the popularity acknowledged by, among others, today's female gurus. After Vivekananda's death, the *Ramakrishna Order* enjoyed increasing popularity, expanding all over India, and is nowadays a well-known and highly respected organization, comprising about one hundred fifty centers and numerous smaller unaffiliated centers (Sinclair-Brull 1997: 43). Vivekananda is considered as one of the "Fathers of Modern Hindu India," together with other famous Indian religious leaders and religious thinkers such as Rammohun Roy (1774–1833), *svāmī* Dayananda Saraswati (1824–1883), founder of the *Ārya Samāj*, Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948), Aurobindo Ghose (1872–1950), Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), and Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan (1888–1975) (Miller 1999: 111).

Sharada Devi was Ramakrishna's first disciple and became his consort through marriage. She was born in a poor but cultured *brāhmaṇa* family in a village of Bengal and married Ramakrishna at five years of age. Their relationship was influenced by the strong impact of popularized Tantric and *śākta* ideologies which are closely related to each others. These emphasize, among other things, the supremacy of the feminine in the form of the goddess, considering the great goddess Mahadevī as supreme deity, and idealize maternity, thus perceiving the divine mother in all women (Teskey Denton 2004: 119).

That idealized relationship between a male and a female guru, particularly widespread in strong *śākta* bastions such as Bengal and South India, is sometimes conceptualized in terms of gender complementarity or androgyny. At a symbolic level, androgyny means the unification of opposites or the integration of gender polarities of male and female.[149] Vivid symbols of androgyny, such as *yin* and *yang*, are present in most religious traditions and are frequently found in Indian mythology. The earliest of all Indo-European androgynes is mentioned in the Ṛgveda with the cosmogonic figures of sky and earth, Dyaus and Pṛthivī, in the act of creation (Doninger O'Flaherty and Eliade 1987: 277). It is also present in the *upaniṣads* with Prajāpati dividing himself into two parts, one male and one female (Bṛhadāraṇyaka up., I.4.3–4). In Indian iconography, God is pictured as, among other things, Ardhanārīśvara, half man, half woman in one body, an androgynous representation of a God/dess. At a theological level, that androgyny is reflected in dual male/female godly conceptions such as Śiva and Śaktī, Bhagavān and Bhagavatī, or Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, where each couple symbolizes the ultimate reality through wholeness.[150] According to South Indian Tantric understandings, which saw their apogee in Śrīvidyā *tantra*, a highly sophisticated philosophical and theological South Indian *śākta* tradition originating from northern Kashmiri Śaivism, Lalitā Tripurasundarī, the red goddess and principal deity, is for example perceived as a dyadic divinity composed of a masculine and feminine principle (Brooks 1992: 60).

Ramakrishna and Sharada Devi's partnership has had a significant impact on Indian spirituality and several "holy couples," married or not, have gone in their footsteps, imparting spiritual knowledge together. In the following, I will mention only a few examples. One famous "couple" in modern times is Aurobindo (1872–1950) and Mira Alfassa Richard (1873–1978) affectionately called "The Mother."[151] Aurobindo was born in Kolkata and withdrew abruptly from political

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[149] The term "androgyne" from the Greek *andros*, "man," and *gune*, "woman."

[150] Ardhanārīśvara is what Wendy Doninger calls "two-in-one" androgyne (*Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, Chicago 1982: 296). According to Ellen Goldberg, the two-in-one androgyne coincides with the Greek term *hiero gamos* or sacred marriage. It is also equated with the *coniunctio oppositorum*, or oppositional pairs such as dark/light, earth/heaven, evil/good, masculine/feminine in Jungian psychology (Goldberg 2002: 114–115).

[151] Although Aurobindo and Mira Alfassa Richard were never married, they are associated with each others to such as extent that I refer to them as a "holy couple."

activities when he was thirty seven years old to dedicate himself to spirituality. Mira Alfassa Richard was born to an Egyptian mother and a Turkish father. She married Paul Richard, a French diplomat and ardent follower of Aurobindo. Mira met Aurobindo for the first time in 1914, and together with her husband, she helped him to develop his mission, establishing, among others, the *Sri Aurobindo Ashram* in Pondicherry (Tamil Nadu). Aurobindo retired in 1926 to consecrate himself to the *Supramental Yoga*, leaving the management of the *āśram* to Mira. Aurobindo considered Mira Alfassa as a symbol of *śaktī*, or an incarnation of the Goddess, and the latter came to play a central role in the creation of Auroville, the well-known utopian society outside Pondicherry.

Kalki (1949–) and Amma from Andhra Pradesh, worshiped as Bhagavān and Bhagavatī are another recent example which will be examined later on. Another couple is Sant Keshavadas (1934–1997) and Rama Mata (1955–) whose headquarters are located near Bangalore (Karnataka). Sant Keshavadas was born in Karnataka. At the age of eleven, he had a mystical experience when he saw white light and heard a voice saying to him "Sing my name throughout the world." That experience was a turning point in his life. After his college studies, he met the famous *yogī* Yogananda who asked him to spread his message of international understanding and peace in Western countries. Together with his wife, Rama Mata, he roamed the world, establishing centers in Europe and Trinidad. He founded the *Temple of Cosmic Religion* in USA, the *Kashavashrama* in Uttarakashi (1976), and the *Vishwa Shanti Ashrama* outside Bangalore. After his death in 1997, Rama Mata decided to continue his mission in India and abroad.[152]

Among the women portrayed in Chapter II, the example of Sai Rajarajeshwari and her divine consort Sathya Sai Baba can serve to illustrate the notion of gender complementarity embedded in Hindu thought. In the preface of books collecting the experiences of devotees, both Sathya Sai Baba and Sai Rajarajeshwari are presented as the embodiment of the universal mother principle. According to the two gurus, the universal mother principle has two aspects: a Śiva-Śakti aspect, which is male, and a Śakti aspect, which is female. That principle assumes a male form as Śiva-Śakti in the person of Sathya Sai Baba,

[152] http://www.inthelight.co.nz/spirit/gurus/ramax002.htm

and a female form as Śakti in the person of Sai Rajarajeshwari (*SSR* 2003: "Preface").[153] Sai Rajarajeshwari is not only believed to be *śakti* or "power" in the full sense of the term but *ādiparaśakti* or "primordial great power," the very source of creation, thus making her the supreme deity in her own right (*SSRS* 1999: 275). Although Sathya Sai Baba and Sai Rajarajeshwari are not married to each other, and have, as far as I understand, never explicitly decided to work together as spiritual masters, Sai Rajarajeshwari and her devotees claim that their symbolic marriage, which took place telepathically, has the same legitimacy as a real marriage (*SSRS* 1999: 332).

I would like to conclude this section by looking at some of the factors involved in Ramakrishna's, Sharada Devi's, and Vivekananda's popularity and their impact on following generations, suggesting that their appeal can be viewed in light of two major factors. The first is that the three gurus provide exemplary models of sanctity. As far as Ramakrishna is concerned, he came to impress people by the depth of his renunciation and spiritual attainments, colored by the ecstatic devotion and divine madness or "God-intoxication" of the Bengal *vaiṣṇava* tradition from which he came. Another model of sanctity of crucial influence is found in the relationship between Ramakrishna and his divine consort Sharada Devi, who managed to combine the ideals of monastic life and householdership. Believed to have realized God while living an ordinary married life, Ramakrishna and Sharada Devi came to function as an ideal spiritual couple, showing that spirituality is compatible with married life and accessible everywhere and to everybody.

Understood as divine mother because of her identity with the goddess she was supposed to embody, Sharada Devi attracted significant numbers of people, and Ramakrishna is said to have shown the greatest consideration and respect for her, "treating her as the first and foremost of his disciples and attendants" (Tapasyananda: 26). Believed to be the recipient of *śakti*, Sharada Devi was worshiped daily by her husband, thus reminding people, and more specifically men, that the feminine should be honored constantly. Given that India was, and still is a patriarchal society where most women have low status,

[153] *SSR* is an abbreviation for *Srimad Sai Rajarajeshwari: Experiences of Devotees*, Mysore 2003 (2000).

and where countless women are still physically and mentally abused by their husbands on a daily basis, I guess that this emphasis was particularly refreshing and inspiring to many. Through their exemplary behavior, Ramakrishna and Sharada Devi have certainly inspired Indian couples to follow in their footsteps in their quest for salvation.

Another major factor which might explain Ramakrishna's, Sharada Devi's, and Vivekananda's popularity is the novelty of their spiritual message, giving Hinduism a partly new identity. Ramakrishna offered an inclusive worldview, integrating different conflicting strands of Hinduism. He propagated the universality of all world religions, claiming that the realization of the same formless absolute was at the very core of all religious traditions. One reason why Ramakrishna's message had such an impact on people is that it was not the product of intellectual reflections, but primarily based upon his own inner spiritual experience (Neevel 1987: 210).

As far as Vivekananda is concerned, his message has had a significant impact on primarily middle-class people and represents what I labeled "Neo-Hinduism" in the introduction of this study. His unprecedented popularity may depend on the fact that he stood on the cusp between tradition and modernity. While being a symbol of modernity par excellence, appearing to be an ideal model of a modern man, he had the ability to combine scientific modern knowledge with traditional monastic worldviews (Miller 1999: 117). Hence, his message had a profound appeal to both traditional Hindus and westerners. Vivekananda abandoned traditional orthodox Hinduism to teach universal form of Hinduism combining *vedānta* philosophy with the devotional and mystical insights of Ramakrishna and the social concerns of the Buddha and of modern reformers (Hopkins 1987: 292). He was also widely considered as having inspired India's freedom struggle movement. In his efforts to present a pure form of Hinduism, free from the British colonial administrators and Christian missionaries' emphasis on idolatry and "caste" concerns, he contributed to restoring a sense of pride and self-esteem among Hindus.

## 5. Conclusion

In the present chapter, I have considered some aspects constituting the environment surrounding female gurus, given that social, cultural,

and religious factors might predispose certain women to embrace spiritual leadership. Most female gurus in my study are well-educated and urbanized members of Indian society. Their choice of taking on a guru-role, and not infrequently reaching out to a broader, international audience, is facilitated by the economic independence most of them enjoy. Moreover, most women are members of higher *varṇas*. The majority of those whose *varṇa* affiliation could be identified were found to have *brāhmaṇa* origins, which indicates that social origins do have a significant impact on female gurus' choice to dedicate themselves to full-time spiritual leadership. Being part of the ritual elite, they are more likely to pursue a religious career. Their privileged background also entails that it might be not surprising to find most of the female spiritual masters being studied in leadership positions.

Apart from their high social position and level of education, their geographic mobility (mainly due to their fathers' professional obligations and entailing financial advancement) further reinforces the picture of female gurus as well-to-do persons. That picture stands, however, in sharp contrast with Selva J. Raj's surprising claim that "Indian female spiritual figures" exhibit "classic traits" such as "low-caste" origins, poverty, "abused childhood," "unloved and misunderstood adolescence," "resistance to domestic life and marriage," and rejection by family (Raj 2005: 142).

Another factor which might have contributed to women's spiritual dedication, at least to some degree, is their exposure to piety in their familial environment since a tender age. Mythological stories told throughout childhood, daily *pūjā*-practices, visits by spiritual persons to family homes, and the undertaking of pilgrimages – all part of the Indian spiritual heritage – are frequently recurring themes in the female gurus' narratives. Moreover, the saintly role models that have pervaded the Indian socioreligious context for centuries still appear to have a noteworthy and tangible impact on people's religious life. Besides the presence of medieval male and female poet-saints such as Mīrābāī, Lalleśvarī, Jñāneśvar, Tukārām, Eknāth, Nāmdev, and Akkamahādēvi who serve as exemplary role models in Indian spirituality, my survey indicates that more recent gurus such as Ramakrishna, Sharada Devi, and Vivekananda have been particularly significant in that respect.

Ramakrishna’s, Sharada Devi’s, and Vivekananda’s exemplary lives, embodying a perfect synthesis between devotionalism, intellectualism, social activism, tradition, and modernity, have given the three spiritual masters a popularity and authority stretching far beyond their lifetimes. By acting as role models and spreading a spiritual message of the universality of religions, they have had a profound impact on the lives and teachings of contemporary female gurus.

Moreover, Ramakrishna, Sharada Devi, and Vivekananda’s message appears primarily to be based on middle-class values. As such, it has had a significant impact on well-educated and middle-class sectors of Indian society. Given that the women under study are primarily well-to-do, “high-caste”, and middle-class, it is no accident that this message came to appeal especially to them.

I believe that a relatively wealthy social context and high social position, combined with a high standard of education and a propitious religious environment, have had a positive impact on the female spiritual masters’ self-image. I would guess that these factors grant most of these women spiritual masters knowledge, inspiration, self-confidence, and autonomy enough to choose their own ways of living and to get access to positions of spiritual leadership. Although there is evidence that sociocultural factors do color most gurus’ religious beliefs and practices to a significant extent, I also believe that individual spiritual abilities and individual religious convictions play a significant role in their personal strivings and choice of a spiritual career.

# IV – The Call to Holiness: Childhood and Teens

Whereas the previous chapter suggested that the social, cultural, and religious context can not be totally be disregarded when considering spiritual inclinations, female gurus and believers maintain that they do not consider these factors to have any significant impact on choosing a spiritual career. Most of the female gurus in the present study claim that their fascination for spirituality was already established at an early age when they found the ascetic lifestyle extremely appealing. This observation is in line with Caroline Walker Bynum's studies on female asceticism in Christian medieval Europe that indicate that childhood vocation and early dedication to spiritual life were more frequent among women than men (Bynum 1986 b: 260).

When spiritual masters and followers refer to gurus' spiritual experiences, my material indicates that they express these experiences in different ways. The female gurus describe their spiritual involvement as an intimate, personal, profound, vivid, and immediate inner experience of a higher power or reality which they communicate with, and which is understood as sacred or transcendent. That spiritual experience, which at best culminates in a state of permanent enlightenment, is pictured as highly individual, emotionally overwhelming, and radical. Although all the gurus claim that the process of enlightenment cannot be put into words, they generally perceive it as an inner calling with mystical and life-changing components, sometimes followed by an urge to fulfill a mission.[154] Enlightenment, which is at the core of mystical experience, and which will be examined in the next chapter, stands partly in contrast to the miraculous religious accounts presented in hagiographical narratives by followers. While most gurus do acknowledge that different phenomena such as ecstatic states, inner voices, and visions are sometimes part of the mystical

[154] See, for example, interviews with Anandmurti Gurumaa in Gannaur (Haryana), 21.1.2006 and discussions with Shakti Devi (Tamil Nadu), field notes 5.2.2004 and 2.3.2004.

experience, most followers tend to put that experience into an exclusively miraculous framework.[155]

It is known from the history of religions that special spiritual personalities such as saints, founders of religions, sages, and holy men and women are associated with stories of miracles, extraordinary life experiences, and miraculous gifts. These traits are often depicted in hagiographies, or stories of holy persons' lives written by followers. Hagiographies belong to a specific literary genre including legends and anecdotes as part of a collective oral tradition. Authorship is not considered particularly significant, and whereas some of the authors have little interpretative interaction with the texts, others have considerable influence over it.

What is characteristic of hagiographers is that they use a language of their own, defying our understanding of the natural world and physical laws. Hence, hagiographies contain legendary elements closely conflated with factual ones, and in the course of time, it becomes hard to distinguish the historical elements of such traditional holy accounts. Given that the boundaries between biographical and hagiographical evidence are rather fluid, hagiographical narratives have until recently been disregarded by scholarship for their lack of historical accuracy, plausibility, and verifiability, in other words for their inability to represent "reality." They have also been ignored by the literary historians because of their lack of virtuoso excellence (Heffernan 1992: 17).

Although there is no doubt that available hagiographical texts are problematic as sources, they can still be a valuable source of knowledge. Read critically, they allow for interesting insights into the mentality surrounding female spiritual masters and the subjectivity of their own worlds. One of the functions of miracle-narratives is to prove that another order of reality exists beyond the phenomenal realm. For followers, miraculous events believed to be sanctioned by God, and defying all reasonable explanation, are experienced as evidence of supernatural power or heavenly intervention. It is precisely these spectacular and extra-ordinary forms of spiritual expression that give legitimacy to their spiritual masters' holiness (Misset-van de Weg

[155] For direct accounts of ecstatic states, inner voices, and visions, see, for example, the interview with Mate Mahadevi in Bangalore (Karnataka), 18.11.1999, or my encounter with Mother Jnanananda from Chennai (Tamil Nadu), field notes 29.10.1999.

2001: 30). Another function of miracle-narratives is to instill faith in non-believers, inspire prospective followers, and consolidate their faith. Miracle accounts establish credibility, validation, legitimacy, and credence in holy persons' actions and position, making the holy person trustworthy in the eyes of the believers, and thus worthy of veneration (Misset-van de Weg 2001: 31). Moreover, given that they present or challenge normative values, miracle-narratives contribute to promoting cohesion between holy persons and believers (Heffernan 1992: 18).

The purpose of the present chapter is to document women's growth into spirituality. I proceed by tracing the gurus' spiritual careers through childhood and adolescence as these are narrated, among other places, in hagiographies, and examine more closely the specific deeds, activities, and behaviors attributed to female gurus.

Hagiographical narratives in most religious traditions indicate that when mystical experiences find expression, these tends to adopt a cultural form according to the ambient, shared cultural heritage and religious standard of holiness. They therefore tend to be standardized, exhibiting similar patterns or hagiographical motifs (Heffernan 1992: 20). Most of the hagiographical narratives collected during my field studies are filled with such supernatural and mystical events and unusual abilities: annunciation of the guru's future birth, often through a precognitive dream; extraordinary birth; remarkable childhood; inexplicable piety from a young age; spiritual initiation through a dream; prophecies; trancelike states of consciousness, often followed by a total indifference to social conventions; lack of regard for likes and dislikes; uncanny knowledge about different topics without having received preliminary instructions; disregard for food or water and other material things; paranormal experiences such as the ability to perform miracles; bilocality; telepathy; clairvoyance; clairaudience; power to control natural phenomena; inexplicable compassion towards all human beings; unusual circumstances of death.[156]

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[156] For a survey of hagiographical motifs or patterns in Indian religious literature, see William L. Smith, *Patterns in North Indian Hagiography*, Stockholm 2000. See also Winand M. Callewaert and Rupert Snell (eds.), *According to Tradition: Hagiographical Writing in India*, Wiesbaden 1994.
For examples of hagiographical accounts of two of the gurus presented in Chapter II, see *Snehamayi Maa* portraying Madhobi Ma from Delhi, and *Srimad Sai Rajarajeshwari Sacharitra*, portraying Sai Rajarajeshwari from Mysore (Karnataka).

Looking at records of individual gurus and their different phases of life, I have chosen to focus more particularly upon four key events or themes chronologically: miraculous birth and exemplary childhood; states of trance and illnesses during childhood and adolescence; paranormal gifts; and spiritual practices in the forest at the end of adolescence. Each theme is illustrated by examples taken from my sample of seventy women as well as, when justified, from some of the women portrayed in Chapter II. The reason for my choice is that although these key events are not present in the lives of all the female gurus, they are among the most frequently recurring themes of the hagiographical narratives and biographical accounts I have had access to. That inventory of examples is accompanied by running comments and reflections. I conclude the present chapter by asking whether miraculous perceptions of female religiosity contribute to restricting women's influence and authority in "real" life.

## 1. Miraculous birth and exemplary childhood

Indian hagiographies abound in examples of birth and childhood being reported as exceptional stages in gurus' lives. The process of conception and birth are regarded as particularly sacred, and signs announcing the advent of a divine being are usually present in hagiographical narratives. Dreams and visions foretelling the future birth of a divine child are some of these signs. That is, for example, the case for Anasuya Devi (1923–1985). Some months before her conception, while pondering over the tragic death of five of his six children, Anasuya Devi's father, Sitapati Rao saw an apparition of a five-year-old girl bathing in "unearthly" light. After a short moment, the girl disappeared, leaving Viṣṇu and Lakṣmī, Sitapati Rao's chosen deities (*iṣṭadevatās*), in her place. Sitapati was extremely puzzled by that apparition but quickly dismissed it as his mind playing tricks on him. However, that event was soon followed by another one. While asleep, he saw a beautiful woman with a large *kuṅkum* mark on her forehead. "Who are you?" he asked. "I am the Mother" she answered. "Whose Mother?" "I am the Mother of All." The next morning, Sitapati went to a famous *paṇḍit* who foretold that a divine child was going to be born. The hagiography tells that although the father was not a superstitious man, he eventually came to recognize that his daughter was

the woman of his dream-vision, as she always wore a large *kuṅkum* mark on her forehead in adulthood (Schiffman 2001: 76–77).

The occurrence of signs interpreted as holy and distinctive marks (*lakṣaṇas*) on a newborn child's body, reminiscent of religious symbols and believed to be of divine origin, plays a prominent role in Indian hagiographies. One such example is found in Anasuya Devi's life-story, which reports that when the midwife was about to cut Anasuya Devi's umbilical cord, the knife transformed into a trident. She also observed a conch on the newborn's abdomen which gradually changed into a lotus flower (Schiffman 2001: 79).[157] The trident and conch are symbols of holiness generally associated with Śiva and Viṣṇu respectively, and the lotus is associated with Lakṣmī.

Another childhood pattern is that gurus tend to distinguish themselves from other children by their precocity. In the case of Sudhamani, later known as Amritanandamayi, the legend tells that during pregnancy, her mother Damayanti had dreams of Kṛṣṇa, Śiva, and of the divine mother. Damayanti delivered without any discomfort, and upon being born, the child did not cry but had a smile on her face. Amritanandamayi's parents were particularly perplexed over the fact that their daughter lay in *padmāsana* with her fingers in *cinmudrā*. They were also worried about her dark-blue complexion and consulted doctors who could not find anything wrong with her. As time went by, the blue color of her skin, reminiscent of Kṛṣṇa and Kālī's complexion, came to be interpreted as a sacred sign.

According to her disciple *svāmī* Amritaswarupananda, Amritanandamayi took her first steps when she was six months old and started speaking Malayalam. When she was five years old, she already displayed extreme devotion and people could find her meditating for hours in an isolated place (Swami Amritaswarupananda 1994: 16–19). Similarly, Anasuya Devi often went into states of *samādhi* during infancy, and when she was nineteen months old, people found her sitting in the full lotus posture. She also had the ability to suspend her breath, once doing so for four days (Conway 1994: 188). In the same way, Devi Shakuntala *gosvāmi* (born ca. 1935–) from Vrindavan told me that she began delivering talks when she was only three years

[157] Both the trident and conch are regarded as sacred symbols in Indian contexts.

old.[158] Madhobi Ma, portrayed in Chapter II, is said to have been born after thirteen months of gestation, and as a newborn, to have had matted hair falling down to her feet (Swami Sidheshwarananda 1991: 3–5).

Another hagiographical feature found in the available literature on female gurus' life stories is the women's possessing an exceptional strength of character highlighting their virtues and attainments. Besides displaying a sharp intellect already in infancy, the women are often portrayed as spectacularly kind, loving, and forgiving in nature, humble, without sin, too perfect for this world. They are praised for their selflessness and concern for the sick and downtrodden. According to *svāmī* Amritaswarupananda, one of Amritanandamayi's close disciple, compassion for the poor is one of the major features of her character. Despite her coming from a poor fishing family, Amritanandamayi used to take food and clothing from her home to give to the needy. Once, seeing a starving family, she gave them one of her mother's gold bangles. When Amritanandamayi's father found out what his daughter had done, it is said that "he tied her to the trunk of a tree in a fit of fury and mercilessly beat her until her tender body bled" (Swami Amritaswarupananda 1994: 55). In spite of this severe maltreatment, she prayed to God to forgive her parents' bad actions as she believed these were committed out of ignorance (Swami Amritaswarupananda 1994: 54–55).

A tangible lack of interest in material things and bodily needs is another characteristic frequently mentioned in hagiographies, and reflected in the cultivation of self-denial and penance. Penance characterized by chastity, solitude, meditation, and obedience is used to eradicate bodily desire and tame the body. During childhood, Sharada (1959–), the disciple of Lakshmana *svāmī* from Tiruvannamalai was reported to have an ascetic nature, an aversion to nice clothes, and no interest in food (Godman 1986: 114). Madhobi Ma, portrayed in Chapter II, claims that she stopped sleeping as early as the age of six.[159] Anandamayi Ma (1896–1982) is said to have spent long periods of time without food or drink. In 1924, she lost the ability to feed herself, and for the rest of her life she had to be fed by others, first by her hus-

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158 Field notes, Vrindavan (Uttar Pradesh), 14.11.2000.

159 Interview with Madhobi Ma in Delhi, 29.10.2001.

band, and then by her mother Didima and her youngest followers. Once, she refused to take food and drink for twenty-three days, and for half a year, she only ate six grains of boiled rice and two or three pieces of fruit a day. When asked why she would not take food, she replied that one could subsist on minimal amounts of food by practicing yoga (Lipski 1996: 19–20). Similarly, it is said that Anasuya Devi (1923–) ate rarely, and that for years, she only lived on "certain leaves and the water in which rice grains had been soaked" (Arms 1980: XVII). She enjoyed cooking for her visitors, however, and gave away food meant for her.

Complete detachment from human ties is also interpreted as a divine sign. One such example is found in the case of Kamala, later known as Mother Meera (1960–). Mother Meera settled in Germany in 1981, and was early recognized as an *avatār* by her mentor Venkat Reddy. Her former disciple, Martin Goodman, recounts that at the age of six, a physical illness affected her, leaving her "senseless for a whole day" (Goodman 1998: 61). According to him, that profound death experience was meant to teach her detachment (Goodman 1998: 61–62). The same capacity for detachment is reported in one of Anasuya Devi's hagiographies. When Anasuya Devi was only four years old, her mother Rangamma, died suddenly. It is said that Anasuya Devi remained calm, showing no grief, and instead impressed everyone with her unusual wisdom (Arms 1980: XI). Anandamayi Ma is also portrayed as not having any emotions. When she was eight or nine years old, she showed no signs of mourning after her three youngest brothers died in quick succession (Lassell Hallstrom 1999: 27).

Shakti Devi, portrayed in Chapter II, claims that she did not mourn when her brother died in December, 1990. Instead, she arranged the funeral with great energy.[160] While she claims to still have affection for her children, she acknowledges that she has no attachment. She does not meet her children and her relatives very often, but when she does sometimes consent to do so, it is more for her family's sake than for her own.[161] Similarly, Madhobi Ma is said to have remained unper-

[160] Field notes, (Tamil Nadu), 5.2.2004.
[161] Field notes, (Tamil Nadu), 3.2. 2004.

turbed when eleven of her thirteen brothers expired within the span of one year (Swami Sidheshwarananda 1991: 15).

In all the examples reported above, we can see how the female gurus make use of miracle narratives which are part of the Indian hagiographical paradigm and allow such accounts to become firmly established in their life stories. These extraordinary events are also backed up by their followers. Hagiographical accounts springing up around living gurus can be understood in light of the sociologist Eileen Barker's concept of *charismatization* (Barker 1993). According to Barker, charisma is not innate but a process of socialization or charismatization by which people *learn* to recognize the charisma of their leader, often after having become followers (Barker 1993: 184).[162] This entails that because the followers of a spiritual leader *believe* that he or she possesses extraordinary qualities, they are willing to grant him/her a special kind of authority (Barker 1995: 13).[163] Not being bound to any rules, a charismatic leader may behave in a way that is perceived as "capricious, irrational, and totally incomprehensible" to a non-believer, as I personally witnessed during my encounter with Sai Rajarajeshwari in Karnataka.[164] However, for followers, although a spiritual leader might sometimes behave unpredictably, that unpredictability is accepted as it "helps to reinforce the feeling that [he or she] is indeed someone special" (Barker 1993: 183; 197). The issue of charismatic authority will receive ampler attention in Chapter V.

Hagiographical patterns are also interesting from the perspective of comparative religion. As pointed out by, among others, William Paden, hagiographical patterns form a meaningful and important body of material within the field of comparative religion. My own study of hagiographical accounts, as well as my encounters with female gurus and their followers convey a similar impression that such patterns, in many ways, still function usefully.

There are, however, exceptions to the discrepancy that can be found between female stereotypes presented in hagiographies and "real" women. Whereas most of the female gurus in the present study are portrayed within a miraculous framework, Anandmurti Gurumaa,

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162 Barker's emphasis.

163 Barker's emphasis.

164 Barker 1993: 183. My encounter with Sai Rajarajeshwari is described in Chapter I under "The practice of *darśan*."

presented in Chapter II, is a woman who definitively does not let socioreligious stereotypes overshadow her "real" personality. When I asked her when she understood that she was not meant to live "an ordinary life" as the enlightened person she is said to be, she answered that she considers her life to be very ordinary "in the so-called definition given by society."[165] As such, she does not believe herself to be a special being, "God's daughter," or anything like that. She also never claimed to have sought any "extra-ordinary" spiritual experiences because, as she said, "whatsoever comes extra always drops off and cannot remain." Instead, she regards herself as very ordinary and claims that she wishes to remain ordinary.[166]

## 2. Trances and illnesses

Sometimes, spirituality is expressed in a more dramatic manner in female accounts. The period anterior to enlightenment is often described as a phase of intense *sādhana* (spiritual practices), where the aspirant usually goes through emotional and physical discomfort. Accounts of intense fear, despair, and physical burning sensations abound in hagiographies, and are believed to take place when the subtle body "surrenders." That is, for example, the case with Mother Meera whose central mission is said to be to bring the "divine light," understood as *paramātman*, down to mankind. That divine light, believed to bring knowledge of God, appeared to her for the first time when she was fourteen years old, and was followed by a ten-day period when she experienced great physical pain and fear. The pain was so intense that she did not believe she would survive, but after ten days, all forms of discomfort left her and she was well again. She interpreted that experience as a preparation for her future mission (Goodman 1998: 90–91).

One of the gurus' most distinctive qualities and one of the most appealing to followers is their ability to slip into trancelike states. The two most well-known female gurus in India so far, Anandamayi Ma (1896–1982) from Bengal, and Amritanandamayi from Kerala distinguished themselves by their deep states of ecstasy. Anandamayi Ma's religious fervor manifested itself by her slipping into deep states of

[165] Interview with Anandmurti Gurumaa in Gannaur (Haryana), 21.1.2006.
[166] Interview with Anandmurti Gurumaa in Gannaur (Haryana), 21.1.2006.

religious ecstasy (*bhāva*) and yogic *kriyās*.[167] Narratives report that when she was still a little girl, she could suddenly fall inert on the ground in the middle of her daily activities and stare at the sky with a distant expression on her face. She could be seen "leaping and jumping in the air and dancing and singing, surging in exaltation and exhilaration… The void, air, light, water etc, indeed all were [her] playmates" (Lassell Hallstrom 1999: 28). Anandamayi Ma's mother Didima was very concerned about her daughter's behavior. Didima was worried for her future, and accordingly, exposed her to frequent shakings and scolding (Lassell Hallstrom 1999: 29). When she was eighteen years old, however, her mystical states were made public for the first time at an evening singing session (*kīrtan*). While sitting with an old lady in a room beside the gathering hall, Anandamayi Ma's body suddenly fell down on the ground.

> The pattern of thrilling was such that, under its impulse, Her body was lifted in the air with an upsurging movement, and nobody had the power to restrain it. There appeared in Her a combination of laughter and tears in a strange way…[which] continued ceaselessly. What a unique phenomenon; the body in divine splendor with smile on the face! Externally and internally, a strange wave of joy, as in rhythm with the inhalation and exhalation of breath, was surging all through Her body. There was, at that time, freedom from any sense of shyness and hesitation which are normal under a veil. Even in those who were making an effort to lift Ma and seat Her, the touch of Her body seemed to transform their inner state in a strange way… Those who performed this *kirtan* considered themselves fortunate and blessed.[168]

From that day onwards, Anandamayi Ma used to slip into deep states of consciousness every time *kīrtans* were performed. On such occasions, she was not allowed to go outside, and used to roll along the floor of the room. Although her husband tried to keep these *bhāvas* secret from the neighborhood, her trancelike practices did not remain a secret for long (Lassell Hallstrom 1999: 36).

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[167] See footnote 93.

[168] Quotation from Brahmacarini Chandan in *Svakriya Svarasamrita*, 3 vols., *Shree Shree Ma Anandamayi Ashram*, Kankhal 1981–1983, 3: 105–107, mentioned by Lassell Hallstrom 1999, p. 34.

Similarly, Amritanandamayi had profound mystical experiences since early childhood. When she was five years old, she already had a strong devotion for Kṛṣṇa, and composed and sang songs of worship to him. While engaging in childhood games or other activities, she would suddenly become withdrawn, totally absorbed in the divine. During these devotional trances, her relatives often used to find her sitting motionless in a remote place, gazing at the sky in a strange manner (Swami Amritaswarupananda 1994: 18). On other occasions, she would dance in ecstasy, oblivious to the surroundings, and it would take a while for her to regain normal consciousness (Swami Amritaswarupananda 1994: 22; 32). As months and years passed by, her spiritual states of consciousness deepened and became more and more intense as she longed for mystical union (Swami Amritaswarupananda 1994: 23).

> Most of all, Sudhamani liked to meditate by the oceanside in the silent hours of the night. […] If Sugunanandan were to search for his daughter on those nights, he would become very agitated when he was unable to find her in the house or yard. Eventually his search took him to the sea, where he would find her absorbed in deep meditation, sitting like an immovable rock. Some of the villagers, mistaking the purpose of Sudhamani's late night visits to the shore, began to spread unkind rumors about her. When these reached the ears of Sugunanandan, he strictly forbade his daughter from going to the sea at night. (Swami Amritaswarupananda 1994: 116)

A common feature of both women's hagiographical life stories is that their unusual behavior was not appreciated by the people around them. It was considered improper and as bringing shame to the families. Like Anandamayi Ma's relatives, Amritanandamayi's parents thought that there was something wrong with their daughter, and they scolded her for not behaving like other children. They believed that she suffered from some form of mental illness (Swami Amritaswarupananda 1994: 19). One common strategy for putting an end to undesirable behaviors was to regard them as diseases. Hagiographies abound in examples where altered states of consciousness are perceived as some kind of dysfunctionality expressed in terms of mental

disorders. In Anandamayi Ma's case, an exorcist (*ojhā*) and a physician were consulted to investigate if she was suffering from some mental illness. They, however, found that her *bhāvas* were not signs of mental illness but instead of elevated states of spiritual attainment (Lassel Hallstrom 1999: 36–37). For Amritanandamayi's part, the harassment from her family members stopped only when she was an adult. Her behavior and ecstatic modes of worship, initially perceived as bizarre by relatives and friends, only gradually came to be understood as divinely inspired.

Trancelike states sometimes manifest themselves physically in the form of bodily symptoms. Anasuya Devi (1923–1985) exhibited signs of altered states of consciousness during the first thirty-five years of her life. She was in permanent *samādhi* since early infancy. At nineteen months of age, her breath was suspended for a period of four days. Anasuya Devi's "fits" were a cause for concern and her relatives took her to a doctor, thinking they were signs of mental disability, insanity, or possession. "Epilepsy," "hysteria," "mental illness," or "possession by spirits" were the diagnoses successively suggested. Anasuya Devi was subjected to drug treatment and consulted exorcists (Arms 1980: X). She also spent a year in a Christian missionary hospital. However, she did not behave like a patient. Instead, she came to be part of the team of nurses and doctors, helping her fellow patients (Arms 1980: XVI). It was only much later that Anasuya Devi's "fits" were recognized to be deep states of *samādhi* (Arms 1980: X).

When she was in her teens, Shobha Ma (1921–) started exhibiting signs suggesting that she was of divine nature. During this period, her sensitivity increased and she had bouts of shaking and fainting while drawing the holy syllables *Om* and *mā* ("mother") on her chest. The doctors whom she consulted considered her to be suffering from some kind of hysteria, but her parents preferred to believe that she was under the influence of a supernatural power (Clémentin-Ojha 1990: 52). When she was fourteen years old, and after the death of her guru, *swāmī* Santadas, she frequently slipped into altered states of consciousness. From that time onwards, she even started having visions (*darśanas*) of him and of different deities. Her relatives were very concerned about her condition and began to believe that she was possessed (*bhūtāveśa*) (Clémentin-Ojha 1990: 52–56). It was also at that time the first miracles started taking place around her, eventually

leading to her public recognition as divine (Clémentin-Ojha 1990: 56-60; 71– 73).

All the examples presented above illustrate what June McDaniel calls "spontaneous ecstasy" which will receive ampler attention in Chapter VII. That kind of ecstasy, which is said to be individual and to vary from person to person, may occur spontaneously in meditation as well as in the middle of daily activities (McDaniel 1989: 19). It is an expression of what McDaniel calls "divine madness." In her monograph, she identifies and differentiates two types of madness belonging to two separate categories and using different frames of reference: divine madness and clinical madness. She shows that the madman and the ecstatic share similar symptoms due to a strong feeling of lack and incompleteness. They both feel separated from what they believe to be the source of happiness.

However, while the madman is longing for material benefits such as money, a wife, a child, or a job, the ecstatic is longing for God. The two also have different behaviors: the madman is forced into an abnormal behavior, while the ecstatic chooses to immerse him- or herself in trancelike states (McDaniel 1989: 9–10). Moreover, whereas the madman experiences pain, the ecstatic is in a blissful state. According to a few gurus I have spoken with, such spiritual trances are believed to occur when the power to awaken *kuṇḍalinī* has not yet stabilized and thus cannot be controlled. That insight might explain why outer expressions of "divine madness" tend to diminish or disappear completely when women's spirituality matures.

Whereas men's and women's hagiographies display similarities in terms of patterns of holiness, they are given different interpretations in some respects. Scholarly evidence examining holy women in Christian contexts suggests that women's trancelike states tend more frequently to be considered deviant, and that women are therefore more often subjected to harassment than men. Similarly, it could be interesting to consider whether the ecstatic states displayed by Indian female gurus tend to be interpreted as mental illness to a greater extent than do those of males. Although I am aware that such an issue is problematic, and that its examination is beyond the scope of the present study, I would like to mention two factors indicating that this might be the case.

First, given the widespread sociocultural belief in innate female weakness and vulnerability, it is likely that women's trancelike states, which commonly include visual and auditory hallucinations, fainting, incoherent speech, severe palpitations of the heart, a decrease in appetite, weight loss, and sleeplessness, tend to be more frequently perceived as signs of mental disturbance than do those of men. Second, given the existence of codes of modesty that women must follow to preserve the family honor, and patriarchal theological assumptions of female sinfulness, it is likely that women's trancelike states might be perceived as more deviant than those of men, as they challenge the sociocultural order. One can therefore guess that, from a sociocultural perspective, the unusual behavior of a majority of Indian female gurus during childhood and adolescence is more prone to be a cause for harassment than is the case for male gurus. Such a view is however contradicted by the socioreligious perceptions of women as an embodiment of *śakti* or female power, believed to be generated through *tapas*. Given the complexity of such co-existing perceptions, it goes without saying that the issue requires further examination.

## 3. Paranormal gifts

The capacity to perform miracles or to display supernatural achievements has always been considered a sign of sainthood, as they are believed to be performed through God's power. Hence, paranormal gifts, which are the prerogative of holy persons in most religious traditions, are especially prominent in Indian yogic and Tantric contexts. A common belief is that during advanced stages of meditation practice, *yogīs* acquire certain occult powers spontaneously, more specifically when practicing a particular stage of meditational discipline called *saṃyama*.[169] According to Mircea Eliade, *saṃyama* gives access to "regions inaccessible to normal experience, taking possession of zones of consciousness and sectors of reality that had previously been, so to speak, invulnerable" (Eliade 1969: 85). Rather than being treated as "powers" obtained through "supernatural intervention," Patañjali regards them as parapsychological and occult phenomena that can be explained through the theory of perception (Eliade 1969: 87).

[169]*Saṃyama* refers to the last stages of Patañjali's yogic techniques: *dhāraṇā* (concentration); *dhyāna* (meditation); and *samādhi*.

Book III of Patañjali's Yogasūtras, beginning with *sūtra* 16, deals with supernormal powers and is devoted to a classification of "perfections" or *vibhūtis* (Woods 1914: 278). The commentary ascribed to Vyāsa gives a list of eight occult powers associated with yogic practice.[170] The powers of becoming invisible or visible at will, reading the mind, overcoming hunger and thirst, surviving after having taken poison, healing the sick, foretelling future events, and manipulating objects in time and space, such as the multiplication of food, along with telepathy, clairvoyance, clairaudience, clairsentience, precognition, recollection of one's former existences, levitation, and bilocation are other supernormal abilities which are frequently mentioned in Indian literature, and the possession of which makes their wielders into "God-men" or "God-women."

Tantric texts provide an explanatory framework of occult powers and of the psychophysical causality underlying their occurrence. In their metaphysical assumptions, the authors are primarily concerned with the relationship between body and mind revolving around key notions such as the subtle body and mind. Tantric writers claim that through contemplative techniques characterized by a withdrawal from the gross level of the material realm and senses, "the realm of the gross body/mind," the adept acquires the ability to get in touch with subtler levels of reality or consciousness (Thurman 1987: 116).

Most gurus, female as well as male, are believed to possess *siddhis*, and the displaying of *siddhis* is attractive to most spiritual seekers. However, manipulating supernatural powers is not generally encouraged by Indian spiritual masters, as this is believed to be motivated by immediate worldly ends rather than by the supreme accomplishment, which is deliverance. Accordingly, the possession of *siddhis* is considered an inferior form of spiritual attainment, reducing the *yogī* to a simple magician and turning him away from his original goal. Playing with *siddhis* is even believed to spoil what has already been spiritually achieved (Eliade 1969: 89).

[170] These *vibhūtis* are 1) "atomization," or the power of becoming as small as an atom; 2) "levitation," or lightness; 3) *mahiman*, "magnification," or the ability to become as large as an elephant, a mountain, or a town; 4) *prāpti*, "extension," or the power of touching the moon "with a mere finger's tip;" 5) "efficacy," or "non-obstruction of desire," for example the ability to dive underground and emerge "as if in water;" 6) *vaśitva*, mastery over the elements; 7) "sovereignty" over the growth, production, and destruction of these elements; 8) *yatrakāmāvasāyitva*, or the "capacity to determine things according to desire" (III.45). James Haughton Woods, pp. 278–280.

The possession of *siddhis* is believed to be a subordinate stage in *sādhana*, a by-product showing that the *yogī* is in a "deconditioning" process and has "suspended the laws of nature" (Eliade 1969: 177). *Siddhi* proponents, however, believe that the performance of miracles has positive effects as it attracts people to the spiritual life. One of India's most popular male gurus, Sathya Sai Baba, known for his supernormal powers, uses to express it as follows: "I give my devotees what they want so that they will begin to want what I want to give them" (White 1972: 869).

Given the negative perceptions surrounding the possession of paranormal abilities, I have not discussed the *siddhi*-issue with the female gurus of the present study. However, recent testimonies from westerners about their spiritual experiences indicate that experimenting with different techniques does affect bodily functions and "normal" perception. While Indian *yogīs* are said to be able to survive without air after being buried alive, contemporary so-called "breatharians," a term found in New Age contexts, claim that by practicing proper yogic exercises, one can survive for years on *prāṇa*, or cosmic energy, instead of food.[171]

Accounts of miracles are numerous in the hagiographies of the female gurus of the present study, and in the following, I will mention a few of them. One *siddhi*, especially common in South India, is the ability to manifest or produce things from nowhere. In Sai Rajarejeshwari's *āśram* in Karekura and at her residence in Mysore, Sathya Sai Baba's and Sai Rajarajeshwari's photos are said to manifest *vibhūti* (holy ash), *haldi* (turmeric powder), and *kuṅkum* (red powder) continuously. When I visited these places, specks of *vibhūti* and *kuṅkum* covered the glass of the frames of certain pictures, while other pictures were totally covered with powder. According to devotees, these different powders are not produced by human hands but started manifesting spontaneously in 1997, when Sai Rajarajeshwari revealed her divinity. It may be interesting to mention in passing that the Sanskrit word *vibhūti* not only means "holy ash" but also "supernatural attainment."[172]

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[171] See, for example, Jasmuheen, *Living on Light: The Source of Nourishment*, Roha Publishing, Burgrain 1998.

[172] Patañjali discusses the *vibhūtis* in the Yoga-sūtras.

The best-documented hagiographical accounts of things manifesting from nowhere are found in connection with Sathya Sai Baba from Puttaparthi. Sathya Sai Baba started displaying *siddhis* at a young age, and the practice is central to his religious activities. He is nowadays known worldwide for his ability to manifest small *mūrtis* (statues), gold jewelry, and *vibhūti* (holy ash) while interacting with his devotees.[173] As previously noted, and according to Sai Rajarajeshwari and the claims of her followers, Sathya Sai Baba is believed to have been Sai Rajarajeshwari's husband in a previous incarnation. That may explain why the manifestation of *vibhūti* and *kuṅkum* is so central in Sai Rajarajeshwari's *āśram*.

The multiplication of food is another "miracle" frequently recurring in hagiographical accounts. During her late teens, when accounts of Amritanandamayi's ecstatic states started to spread outside her village, and crowds started gathering around her, we are told that the sons of the landlords of the village started reacting negatively to this increasing popularity. They were skeptical about Amritanadamayi's trancelike states and organized themselves in what they called "The Rationalist Movement" also known as "The Committee to Remove Blind Beliefs." One of the purposes of their activities was to put an end to Amritanadamayi's devotional gatherings (Swami Amritaswarupananda 1994: 96–97).

One evening, skeptical people asked Amritanadamayi to perform a miracle in order to prove her divinity. Amritanandamayi answered that the purpose of her gathering was to inspire people's devotion and not to display miracles. When the skeptics insisted, Amritanandamayi finally agreed to perform a miracle, telling people that it was the first and last time in her life she would grant such a request. After delivering her lecture, Amritanandamayi asked one of the skeptics to go and fetch a pitcher of water which was used for worship, and to dip his fingers into it. To the gathering's surprise, the water is said to have turned into milk. Then, she called another non-believer and asked him to dip his fingers into the milk. The milk had now turned into a sweet pudding, or *pañcāmṛtam*, made of five substances such as milk, bananas, raw sugar, raisins, and rock sugar. The pudding was distributed as *prasād*, or blessed food, to the participants. Although the sweet

[173] See for example Howard Murphet, *Sai Baba: Man of Miracles*, London 1971.

pudding was distributed to more than one thousand people, it is reported that the contents of the pot did not diminish during the whole evening (Swami Amritaswarupananda 1994: 85–87).

Examples of bi-location, or the ability to be in two places simultaneously, have been reported in different hagiographies. It is said that, during her lifetime, Shyama Ma (1916–1999) went through a period of displaying occult powers. She had the ability to expand and contract, fly in the air, multiply food, start and stop rains, prevent accidents, and give spontaneous healing. After some time, however, she abandoned these practices (Jalan 1977: 96–97).

Once, Shyama Ma received an invitation to sing at a musical event in one of Mumbai's suburbs. In spite of the fact that she declined to attend the concert, given that she did not consider herself to be a professional singer, the promoters printed her name on the program. The day of the concert, Shyama Ma was in Malad, another suburb of Mumbai, and spent the entire night there, chanting *kīrtans* with devotees. In the concert hall, the announcer asked Shyama Ma several times to come onto the stage for a ten-minute performance. All of a sudden, she appeared on the stage and sang a melodious song. A tape of the performance was even recorded and photographs taken, while the disciples in Malad confirmed that Shyama Ma had been with them all night. The biographer also reports that another time, disciples saw her in Kolkata (West Bengal) and Allahabad (Uttar Pradesh) simultaneously (Jalan 1977: 50–53).

Healing the sick is another theme frequently narrated in the hagiographical accounts of the women in the present study. Though Mata Amritanandamayi is not considered a healer, and does not want to be regarded as such, some people have reported that she is able to alleviate physical illnesses. *The New York Times* mentions a woman whose six-year-old blind son has cerebral palsy and epilepsy, but was almost cured after being lifted into Amritanandamayi's lap for a hug. The child's mother says: "He used to have 400 seizures a day. […] After he saw her it went to twice a week and then to once every seven months."[174]

[174] "Lining Up for Hugs from a Guru of Touch." Excerpted from *The New York Times*, 8.7.1998. http://amritapuri.org/media/new_york_times.htm

The most moving of Amritanandamayi's hagiographical accounts is the story of Dattan, a man suffering from leprosy since a young age. Dattan had been turned out of the house by his own parents, friends, and relatives, and lived as a beggar. His body was covered with infected putrid wounds oozing pus, his hair had fallen out, and his eyes were only two small slits. Dattan heard about Amritanandamayi and decided to visit her in Vallickavu. When he entered the temple, people urged him to leave immediately. However, Amritanandamayi called him and consoled him, and to the audience's surprise and horror, she licked the pus from his infected wounds. Each time he came back to visit her, Amritanandamayi received him with the same compassion. Dattan began to gradually recover, and after some time, he was completely transformed: his wounds healed, his hair grew back, and he could open his eyes normally (Swami Amritaswarupananda 1994: 229–230).

During one of my stays in Amritapuri, I asked *svāminī* Krishnamritaprana, an Australian-born woman and one of Amritanandamayi's closest disciples if she could explain these cases of spontaneous recovery from physical illnesses. Speaking from her own experience, she answered that Amritanandamayi never decides by herself that someone will be healed, but that sometimes healing happens spontaneously. *Svāminī* Krishnamritaprana explained that when a person comes close to a *mahātma* (great soul), and he or she has God's grace due to good karmic actions, that person may draw the grace from the guru and be healed. Amritanandamayi is said to be able to make extra *saṅkalpas*, or determination in line with specific vows, for people for their recovery. *Svāminī* Krishnamritaprana also believes that gurus can heal people by "taking upon themselves" the suffering of followers, out of compassion for mankind.[175]

Willingly taking upon themselves the karma of their devotees in the form of physical suffering is a trait commonly attributed to most Indian gurus. The idea is reminiscent of the Christian concept of redemption (from Latin *redemptio*, derived from *red-emere*, "to buy back"), literally meaning "liberation by payment of a price or ransom," i.e., that a price has to be paid to redeem people (Marcoulesco

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[175] Interview with *svāminī* Krishnamritaprana in Amritapuri (Kerala), 13.12.1999. *Svāminī* Krishnamritaprana is one of Amma's first disciples and has served her since 1981. She took *sannyāsa* initiation in 1994.

1987: 228). In Christianity, the notion of a suffering savior is related to the belief that Jesus of Nazareth redeemed humankind by suffering and dying on the cross for people's sins.

When gurus take the effects of people's ailments upon their own body, it is said, they suffer severe physical pains, and such accounts are well documented in male and female gurus' hagiographies. Lisa Lassell Hallstrom calls this ability a *siddhi*, even if it is not listed among Patañjali's yogic powers in the Yogasūtras (Lassell Hallstrom 1999: 117). This *siddhi* is often practiced directly by the guru in a tangible manner: through various offerings from devotees, particularly food, through the touching of feet, or through hugging. Lisa Lassel Hallstrom reports the story of Anandamayi Ma who healed a newborn from a deadly disease, taking a boil "big like a double head" from his ear to her own hand (Lassell Hallstrom 1999: 117–118). Shyama Ma (1916–1999) from Vrindavan is said to have completely cured Veena, a thirteen-year-old girl from a serious heart disease by transferring the illness to herself. Veena's heart was enlarged to three times its normal size, and the doctors had lost hope for her recovery. However, Shyama Ma asked Veena to stop taking medicines, assuring her that God would rescue her. Shyama Ma became unwell and experienced pains in every part of the body but recovered after some weeks (Jalan 1977: 69–70). In the same way, we can read that Amritanandamayi experiences her devotees' diseases when "taking on" the negativities of those she hugs, thus suffering often from headaches and heartburn (*Awaken Children!* 1: 1997: 224).

Miracle stories are, however, not present in all the narratives written by the gurus themselves or by people around them. *Svāmī* Chidvilasananda from Maharashtra, familiarly called Gurumayi (1955–), and Anandmurti Gurumaa from Haryana are female gurus who reject *siddhis*. In the *Siddha Yoga* lineage, of which Gurumayi is the current spiritual leader, her predecessors vehemently condemn all forms of supernatural tricks and craving for extraordinary powers. In his book *From the Finite to the Infinite*, Gurumayi's guru *svāmī* Muktananda describes what happened to him during his *sādhana*. Before his enlightenment, Muktananda met different spiritual teachers, among others, a man teaching how to attain supernatural powers. This man was said to have the ability to materialize bus tickets and money. He also had

the power to transport a piece of apple from one place to another, and money from one pocket to another.

After having learnt all these tricks, *svāmī* Muktananda went to his guru Bhagawan Nityananda, but when he approached him, Nityananda took out a long stick and started scolding him. Later on, Muktananda found out that Nityananda's anger was due to the fact that his disciple had succumbed to the temptation of learning to perform miracles (Muktananda 1994: 317). Although *Siddha Yoga*'s spiritual leaders acknowledge that *siddhis* might arise as by-products during *sādhana*, they strongly emphasize that no particular attention should be paid to them.

Anandmurti Gurumaa from Haryana, portrayed in Chapter II, claims that it happens that people she encounters thank her for having healed them from a serious illness. However, she says that she does not perform any miracles and does not have anything to do with anyone's recovery. Nevertheless, she believes that the state of mind of the patient influences his or her recovery. According to her, a person can recover quickly if he or she concentrates on *sādhana* and meditates regularly without paying too much attention to the body (*Going Beyond the Mind*: 49–50). As mentioned before, when I went through my list of questions with one of Anandmurti Gurumaa's male devotees before my interview with her, he told me that she did not want to deal with the issue of "gurus, *siddhis*, and healing skills." I guess that she did not want to discuss what she might consider to be an unserious issue, thus sharing the opinion that the displaying of *siddhis* has nothing to do with spirituality.

## 4. "Going to the forest"

In most religious traditions, renunciation is viewed as a prerequisite to spiritual liberation. The process of renunciation includes the successive abandonment of the assumptions, concepts, attitudes, and judgments that characterize the human condition. In attaining spiritual liberation, one is expected to disentangle oneself completely from the emotional, intellectual, and social habits of mind (the *ego*) that perpetuate one's existence in the cycle of death and rebirth (*saṁsāra*). An initial step in that process is physical renunciation such as seclusion, and the renunciation of material possessions and comfort, in

order to transform one's life-style, state of mind, and behavior. Physical renunciation is intimately associated with the belief that external transformation will eventually lead to complete internal transformation.

One of the ways of practicing renunciation during adolescence, which is well-documented in Indian culture, is to leave secular life and spend a period of time dwelling in the forest, with or without undertaking itinerant asceticism. "Going to the forest," or going to forest hermitages, and doing *tapas* (austerities) such as solitary meditation in order to realize God is a common theme of the Epics. The hermitage ideal is frequently referred to in traditional Brahmanism and mentioned in texts such as the *upaniṣads*. Doing *tapas* in the forest in order to have a vision of God is also mentioned as an ideal in texts such as the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata. Arjuna, for example, is said to have performed *tapas* in the forest. Commonly speaking, the expression "going to the forest" has even become a common metaphor for "renouncing the world" (Parkhill 1995: 1). In modern time, male gurus such as Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950), Yogananda (1893–1952), and Nityananda (1896–1961) have followed that model of seclusion in the forest and/or itinerant asceticism during a period of their lives. For example, Ramana Maharshi left his family at the age of sixteen to live in a cave on the mountain Arunachala (Tamil Nadu).

A few women in the present study relate that during their teens, they were attracted by the idea of monastic seclusion or a retreat in the jungle or forest as a model of asceticism, and there is evidence that several of them have considered the possibility of doing *tapas* in the forest. Mate Mahadevi (1946–), a *liṅgāyat* guru from Karnataka living in Bangalore told me that when she was six years old, her mother used to tell her stories from the epics. When she heard the story of Dhruva – a young male devotional ascetic from Mathura depicted in the *purāṇas* – she was so inspired that one night she decided to leave her house for the forest. She tried to unlock the door, but failed because of her young age. She started crying and her mother asked her what was wrong. Mate Mahadevi answered that she wanted to go to the forest and realize God as Dhruva had done. Her mother consoled

her by promising that she could go and do *tapas* when she had grown up.[176]

When Mate Mahadevi was eighteen, she met her guru Lingananda *svāmī* for the first time. Already the next day, she wanted to join Lingananda *svāmī*'s mission and stay permanently with him. She told her guru: "If you give me shelter, it is very good. If you don't give me shelter, then give me the permission. I will go to some forest and stay there."[177] At that time, she had a strong admiration for Akkamahādēvi, a famous twelfth-century female poet-saint from Karnataka, known, among other things, for her *vacanas* (poetry). In the last part of her life, Akkamahādēvi lived in Kadaliban forest situated near Sri Shaila in Andhra Pradesh. Mate Mahadevi wished to emulate her by also going to this forest. However, Lingananda *svāmī* dissuaded Mate Mahadevi from putting her plans into execution. He told her that although Kadaliban forest used to be a center of yoga in the twelfth century, sheltering spiritual people such as *yogīs* and *yoginīs*, times had changed. Nowadays, Kadaliban forest was full of animals and therefore very dangerous. Lingananda *svāmī* asked her to have patience for the time being and instead do *tapas* in her own house.[178]

A few of the seventy women in the present study, did, however, leave their family for the forest in their teens for an extended period of time, all of them with their family's disapproval. In 1980, at the age of twenty one, Karunamayi Ma (1959–), also known as Vijayeswari Devi, spent twelve years in the remote forest of Kanvaksendra (Andhra Pradesh), immersing herself in spiritual practices. In her biography it is claimed that her "only companions were the wild beasts and birds who fetched her fruits and honey – Her only diet during that period."[179]

Shree Ma of Kamyakha, born in the 1940s, now living in the United States, spent her late adolescence and twenties wandering alone in the Himalayan mountain. She tried to run away from home in her early teens, as she felt an urge to do *sādhana*, but an apparition of Jesus prevented her from putting her plans into execution. After graduating

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176 Interview with Mate Mahadevi in Bangalore (Karnataka), 18.11.1999.

177 Interview with Mate Mahadevi in Bangalore (Karnataka), 18.11.1999.

178 Interview with Mate Mahadevi in Bangalore (Karnataka), 18.11.1999.

179 Karunamayi Sri Sri Sri Vijayeswari Devi, *Light on Sri Lalitha Sahasranama*, New York 1999, p. vi.

from college, she went to her grandparents and uncles in order to get their blessings for leaving for the forest. Most of them expressed their disapproval, the only exception being her grandmother (Satyananda Saraswati 1997: 30). Without any belongings apart from the clothes she was wearing and a copy of the Devīmāhātmya, a text popularly called *Caṇḍī*, she is said to have wandered for eight years alone through the jungles of Assam, Sikkim, Nepal, Bhutan, Bengal, Bihar, and Uttar Pradesh, subsisting only on turmeric, *tulasī*, and sandal water (Sayananda Saraswati 1997: 38–39). At that time, she only weighed sixty pounds (Sayananda Saraswati 1997: 39). She mingled with *sādhūs*, and spent most of her time in meditation, experiencing the state of *mast*, a state of divine intoxication, "blissful, full of joy," and characterized by "total freedom and lack of limitation" (Satyananda Saraswati 1997: 36).

After having taken initiation from a *śākta* guru named Shankar Khepa, Madhobi Ma presented in Chapter II, ran away from home in order to be in the company of her guru. Her guru lived naked in a cremation ground, and for a period of time, she joined him and lived there as a *yoginī*. Given that she was born into a royal family and was the only daughter among her siblings, her parents were extremely worried. She was therefore married at young age in order to be tied to a "decent" life.[180] While I do not know if Anandmurti Gurumaa, portrayed in Chapter II, actually lived in the forest, she claims that for some years in her later teens, she embraced an itinerant lifestyle, roaming around in different holy places such as Rishikesh, Haridvar, and Vrindavan in order to associate with like-minded people.[181]

The symbolic meanings and role of the forest in the Indian Epics have been explored by Thomas Parkhill. In his interpretation of the concept in light of Turner's theory, he shows that the epic forest is ambiguous and functions as a liminal space, with both "chaotic" and "paradisiac" dimensions (Parkhill 1995: 9). The epic forest symbolizes pristine purity and wilderness, and is believed to provide protection, shelter, and nourishment. Free from crowds, dirt, and noise, it is also an appropriate place for solitude, a place where social ties and ordi-

[180] Interview with, Madhobi Ma in Delhi, 29.10.2001.
[181] Interview with Anandmurti Gurumaa in Gannaur (Haryana), 21.1.2006.

nary sociocultural conventions are abolished (Parkhill 1995: 8).[182] As such, the forest has always been considered as an ideal place for the pursuit of spiritual practices. The epic forest can also be viewed as symbolizing a potential source of danger because of its "lurking shadows" and the presence of wild beast and demons (*rākṣasas*), making that liminal space particularly suitable for spiritual transformation (Parkhill 1995: 9; 8–9).

In a study of fairy tales, Bruno Bettelheim explores the central role of the forest for a child's psychological maturation. He states that "the forest […] symbolizes the place in which inner darkness is confronted and worked through; where uncertainty is resolved about who one is; and where one begins to understand who one wants to be" (Bettelheim 1976: 93). Bettelheim's insights about children are applicable to the spiritual maturation process seen in the accounts of female gurus going to the forest. Although going to the forest shows some similarities with the *vānaprastha* (forest-dwelling) stage of the *caturvarṇa* scheme, Parkhill views it as a specific *saṁskāra* or rite of passage, a stage of transition between adolescence and adulthood, which can explicitly be equated with the stage between the *brahmacarya* (student stage of life) and the *gṛhastha* (householder stage of life) (Parkhill 1995: 28–29).

Three phases are identified in the process of rite of passage: separation, transition, and incorporation. Van Gennep states that marriage rites tend to stress incorporation, funeral rites tend to stress separation, and pregnancy and initiation rites tend to stress transition. Initiation can be viewed as transition from a worldly and profane realm to a sacred realm, a period of transformation from one state to another (Van Gennep 1960: 10–13). In Indian contexts, that transformation can be achieved through purification or "austerities" (*tapas*), changing the practitioner from an ordinary man into a purified ascetic. According to Eliade, "death to the profane human condition" through the practice of *tapas* is emphasized (Eliade 1969: 362). *Tapas* is characterized by the denial of human impulses such as desires and needs of the body which are associated with ordinary life. Solitude, fasting, chastity, and long periods of motionlessness are examples of this reversal of the

[182] See also "Village vs. Wilderness: Ascetic Ideals and the Hindu World" in *Monastic Life in the Christian and Hindu Traditions: a Comparative Study*, Austin B. Creel and Vasudha Narayanan (eds.), New York 1990, 125–160.

ordinary flow of life (Eliade 1969: 362). As Turner puts it, the "metaphorical death undergone by initiands or pilgrims puts them in the in-between state of life-in-death" (Turner 1977: 38).

Itinerant asceticism is traditionally held in high esteem in India, and in certain religious traditions, it has been considered superior to the way of life of the householder with a fixed residence (Heesterman 1988: 254–255). However, some scholars, such as Meena Khandelwal, suggest that going to the forest and/or roaming around in holy places, rejecting social ties in order to realize God, as the Buddha did, is a patriarchal ideal, a male prerogative, given that this model of sainthood has, for ideological and practical reasons, traditionally almost exclusively been reserved for men. With its call for total renunciation of the world, itinerant asceticism has never been encouraged as an option suitable for women and is still often viewed as an unacceptable form of behavior (Khandelwal 2004: 182–183).

In the same vein, *svāmī* Satyananda Saraswati claims that traveling alone around India is inconceivable for a woman, and, that it is even more inconceivable to travel "without money, possessions or care" (Satyananda Saraswati 1997: 36). According to him, itinerant asceticism is unusual among women because it challenges Indian social norms that consider women weak and therefore in need of protection. Wandering alone, unaccompanied by husbands or fathers, is therefore unusual. It also conflicts with the social demands of domestic responsibilities and motherhood: that women should stay at home and take care of the household. Accordingly, it is not surprising that only few of the women in this study have chosen to spend some years pursuing such a lifestyle. It is worth noting, however, that with the exception of Madhobi Ma, all the women who felt attracted by itinerant asceticism during their teens, or who actually spent some years in the forest, have chosen to continue to pursue a life in celibacy after having tasted the experience of isolation and seclusion provided by such a lifestyle.

## 5. Conclusion

Whereas in the previous chapter I argued that the socioreligious environment characterized by such factors as education, background, and religious influence might help to determine who achieved a reputation as a guru, the present chapter testifies that this picture diverges

greatly from how followers perceive their spiritual master and how female gurus perceive themselves.

In the present chapter, which is mainly based on hagiographical accounts where biographical and legendary elements are intimately intertwined, I have considered the great variety of female religious experiences, showing that mystical experiences and supernatural powers are central aspects of female gurus' spirituality. Hagiographical materials indicate that the spiritual careers of Indian female gurus are lined with miraculous events revolving around exceptional births, dreams and visions, trancelike states of consciousness, and exhibition of paranormal gifts, or *siddhis*, such as bi-location, healing of the sick, and the multiplication of food. Moreover, we have seen that leaving the secular life in one's late teens to spend a period of time in the forest practicing spiritual austerities, as a stage of transition between adolescence and adulthood, also constitutes an important phase of some women's spiritual career. That practice is, however, never encouraged as a suitable option for women, as it conflicts with cultural expectations of women's vulnerability and the social demands of domestic responsibilities and motherhood.

Despite the occurrence of tangible religious patterns in the hagiographical accounts portraying the lives of the female gurus of the present study, suggesting that a collective perception of holiness transcends each individual case, gurus and followers emphasize individual factors in their understanding of spirituality. From their point of view, spirituality is a highly individual and personal experience, and they accordingly reject all kinds of sociological, psychological, or anthropological explanations. This individuality is embodied in the guru herself, shaped by her life experiences, and practiced in her particular surroundings and form of religiosity.

Whereas representations of female Hindu spirituality among the seventy women in the present study tend to be part of a miraculous framework, my own observations indicate that there is a discrepancy between the followers' perceptions and the gurus' self-representations in some respects. While most female spiritual masters tend to be silent about their mystical experiences, for followers, focusing upon women's spiritual attainments is of great importance. By playing down the gurus' worldly status and emphasizing their mystical abilities, believers create an aura of holiness around their spiritual masters, locating

them beyond the realm of "normality," or normal standards of behavior. This holiness is reflected in accounts of gurus' exceptional qualities and supra-mundane abilities, which are interpreted as signs of divine power, showing the unique, exceptional, and extraordinary nature of the women's spirituality. Such a miraculous framework is highly significant in terms of granting women authority and religious power.

Whereas hagiographical sources indicate that miraculous stories give legitimacy to the holiness of spiritual masters in the eyes of followers, one fundamental issue that arises is whether such narratives serve or detract from female gurus' ministries. Examining the *Vita* of the Christian medieval saint Christina Mirabilis, Anke E. Passenier concludes that the miraculous narratives coloring her life-story are ambivalent. She argues that on the one hand, they authorize the ministry, proving that Christina Mirabilis received her mission directly from God, without human intervention. She is thereby elevated to an otherworldly realm, the realm of the divine. On the other hand, Passenier claims that the miraculous framework of Christina Mirabilis's life, which emphasizes dramatic religious performances, ecstatic abilities, and super-human qualities, has a negative effect (Passenier 2001: 177). It functions as a "diversion, distracting the reader's attention" from the "real" Christina Mirabilis who practiced mendicancy, vagrancy and preaching, given that such behaviors did not fit the standard female codes of holiness prevalent in the medieval spiritual context (Passenier 2001: 161).

Passenier's conclusion is that "The authority of the 'real' woman, living an 'extra-regular' religious life, is camouflaged by the authority of an extraordinary saint, who remains aloof from human society. Female religious ministry is carefully stylized to match established cultural codes and kept within boundaries" (Passenier 2001: 161). In other words, stressing the miraculous aspect of Christina Mirabilis's mission at the expense of her actual ministry tends to marginalize her (Passenier 2001: 177).

That view is echoed by Morny Joy who argues that, generally speaking, holy women have been perceived as "marginal" or "aberrant" (Joy 1993: 28). She states that those women's attempts to cope with such opinion have led "to their exaltation as singular expressions of a unique (and generally unattainable) relationship to a God" (Joy

1993: 28). What Anke Passenier and Morny Joy criticize is the common and widespread tendency to make "real" women living an "extra-regular" religious life, i.e., a life at the margins of or outside cultural norms, "extraordinary" or otherworldly.

According to my view, people's fascination for women defying sociocultural norms and choosing unusual ways of behaving in order to express themselves is understandable in the context of modern society where predictability, rationality, and patriarchal values prevail. Accordingly, it is not surprising that the only available means for devotees to face the imcomprehensible is to interpret it in terms of extraordinariness and otherworldliness. However, the question whether miracles attributed to female gurus contribute to their marginalization is pertinent. Although most female gurus do not always seem to reflect over, or do not care about, how people perceive their life-style, it is likely that in Hindu discourse, spiritual stereotypes restrict their influence and tie them to cultural boundaries. Being portrayed as mystical and otherworldly, they are relegated to the role of holy figures. Moreover, by being pictured as asexual, nurturing, selfless, and self-sacrificing, they are also relegated to the traditional role of (divine) mother. As in the case of medieval Christian female saints, it is likely that the reason why such traditional roles and virtues are so highly emphasized is that they make the women unthreatening to male control. These perceptions stand, however, in sharp contrast with female gurus' actual ministries, as the next chapter will demonstrate.

# V – From Private Religiosity to Public Recognition: Becoming a Guru

In the previous chapter, I looked at women believed to possess heightened spirituality, who immerse themselves in religious practices from childhood, and sometimes choose a life of seclusion or religious penance for extended periods of time. We saw that many gurus displayed supernatural abilities and insights, and had prophetic and miraculous gifts already from a young age. These early spiritual experiences, understood to be divinely inspired, have proven to have been crucially formative of later development. As time went by, the women's spiritual abilities and ecstatic modes of worship started attracting followers, few in number at the beginning, who flocked to their homes for *darśan*. As they went on preaching, advising, and counseling people, the number of visitors gradually increased. Finally, they came to be recognized and acknowledged by their followers as a source of wisdom and ultimate truth.

The recognition of women as unusually spiritually gifted has resulted in many cases in the establishment of powerful institutional structures. These are committed to charitable activities and the dissemination of spiritual teachings, and are financially supported by voluntary donations. The most well-known contemporary female guru, Amritanandamayi who is said to currently have one million devotees all over the world, has, like many others gurus, established *āśrams* and centers in different parts of India and in numerous foreign countries. Whereas not all spiritual masters have such an impressive following, or are that renowned, most of them have seen their activities take root and expand over the past years or decades. This expansion is visible, for instance, in the increasing number of websites continuously popping up on the Internet, and the question to consider is what factors are involved in that process.

My purpose in the present chapter is to examine the unfolding process that leads from private religiosity to public recognition among the seventy women of this study. I proceed by taking a closer look at the issue of female leadership in relation to notions of authority and power. The questions I address revolve around the following key issues: How do women grow into spiritual leadership? What are their

religious activities like? Do they participate in religious life as men do? If not, what sanctions their spiritual roles? Can we discern tensions between informal and formal styles of religious expression?

Examining the issues of authority, power, and female spiritual leadership among Christian and Jewish women in contemporary America, Catherine Wessinger identifies different types of religious authority. One important source of religious authority, giving legitimacy to leadership roles, is scriptural authority. Closely related to scriptural authority is what she calls "authority of office," where authority is earned through affiliation with publicly recognized religious institutions by means of "ordination, election, or appointment," in other words, through formal institutional avenues (Wessinger 1996: 8–9). A third type of religious authority is charismatic authority.

In order to identify the different types of religious authority found among my sample of seventy women, I make use of Catherine Wessinger's classification scheme and investigate how the women fit these different types of religious leadership. Religious authority is closely related to the issue of transmission of spiritual authority and, accordingly, I draw on a typology suggested by Kathleen M. Erndl in order to present the variety of forms of transmission of spiritual authority from guru to disciple found within my sample (Erndl 2004: 246–248). In the final part of the present chapter, I address the issue of spiritual leadership among female gurus in relation to notions of legitimacy, authority, and power.

## 1. Scriptural and institutional authority

Whereas the field of history of religions claims to be unbiased and all-inclusive in terms of studying all religious expressions of humankind, recent research has demonstrated that it principally reflects male concerns (Kinsley 2002: 5). Hindu studies have long been dominated by the disciplines of Indology and Oriental Studies which emerged in the nineteenth century and still dominate the academic landscape. Indological studies issue, however, from a specific context, and are written from a specific angle by people belonging to a specific social group. They primarily provide models derived from the interpretation of texts from the Vedic and classical periods, and therefore are little concerned with contemporary anthropological sources (van der

Veer 1997: 154–155). However, because of their origins in learned *brāhmaṇa* contexts, scriptural sources are invested with significant authority.

Scriptural authority, in its turn, has traditionally been considered the basis for institutional authority. Whereas Christian institutional authority, as Wessinger puts it, has shown to be earned through ordination, election, or appointment, the process leading from private religiosity to institutional authority in Hindu contexts revolves around formal issues of appointment reflected in key terms such as *dīkṣā* (initiation), *paraṃparā* (lineage), and *sampradāya* ("sect" or "teaching tradition").

According to traditional scriptural sources such as the *dharmaśāstras*, a guru was ideally supposed to be a *brāhmaṇa*, or at least of good family, be male, and have knowledge of the *śāstras* (Gonda 1985: 231). In later religious contexts of learning, such as Tantric traditions, where the concept of guruhood became central, the *guru-śiṣya* (guru-disciple) relationship came to be highly emphasized, and initiation (*dīkṣā*), or consecration (*abhiṣeka*), was regarded as compulsory (Padoux 2000: 44–45). The primary form of initiation was *nāmādīkṣā* where the disciple received a new name, a mantra, and the transmission of *śakti* or spiritual energy through *śaktipāta*. Another key concept in *tantra*, closely associated with the *guru-śiṣya* relationship, is the notion of *paraṃparā* or spiritual lineage, where the guru is supposed to choose a disciple to be his or her successor in an unbroken chain of spiritual masters. These Tantric models still influence the perceptions of guruhood in contemporary India.

Besides these characteristics, the process of initiation was, and still is closely associated with the issue of institutional affiliation. Scholars consider "sectarian" affiliation as one of the main categories for classifying ascetics (Wilson 1958; Ghurye 1953; Bhandarkar 1965). Authoritative Hindu texts stipulate that gurus should be part of a *sampradāya*, a term which can be translated as "teaching tradition," "sect," or "school." The *sampradāyas* display a wide array of religious beliefs and practices, and what is specific for them is their claim to possess a unique soteriology (Teskey Denton 2004: 81). The followers of a specific *sampradāya* usually select a distinctive appearance including such things as "sectarian" marks on the forehead (*tilak*), a specific color and style of dress, and distinctive ritual implements.

Given the significant discrepancy between the prescriptions stipulated, on the one side, in authoritative textual sources and scholarly studies, and on the other side, female gurus' actual religious practices, it has proven to be problematic to refer to textual religious traditions in order to make sense of contemporary female religious life. Textual sources provide only a partial view of women's actual religious lives, rendering their religious experiences and activities practically invisible. In that respect, my experiences of the field are in line with Rita Gross's assumption that studies of women's religious lives cannot be approached through textual studies but have to be researched through anthropological methods (Gross 2002: 59).

The discrepancy between textual sources and women's actual lives is reflected in the models of female spiritual transmission found while researching the present thesis. My experience from the field indicates that not all female gurus have a spiritual master, or have received formal *nāmādīkṣā* or *mantradīkṣā*. There is also evidence that initiation is not necessarily performed by a living guru. Instead, the women often claim to have been initiated by a guru in a dream or directly by a god or goddess.

Moreover, receiving *nāmādīkṣā* ("name initiation") from a specific guru does not automatically imply either being part of a teaching tradition (*sampradāya*), or being affiliated with a formal spiritual organization. Following the praxis embraced by most Hindus, it turns out that most of the women in the present study do not have any specific religious affiliation at all. Instead, they appear to have an inclusive approach to religion, incorporating elements from several sectarian streams of Hindu religion in terms of texts, gods, and goddesses, based on what I call "syncretistic Neo-Hinduism" in my introduction. In other words, notions of formal *dīkṣā*, *sampradāya*, and *paraṃparā* prove to have little or no relevance for the religious involvement of most contemporary female gurus.

Moreover, my material indicates that the ascetic mode embraced by female gurus is not always entirely clear. The expression "ascetic mode" is borrowed from Lynn Teskey Denton who enumerates the following modes of asceticism: "renunciatory asceticism" (*sannyāsa*), "celibate asceticism" (*brahmacarya*), and "Tantric asceticism" (Teskey Denton 2004: 93–99). As we will see in the next chapter, the women represented in the present study embrace a broad variety of Hindu

ascetic modes. Whereas some of them identify themselves as *brahmacāriṇīs* or *sannyāsinīs*, others do not call themselves anything at all. In other words, what is striking about the female ascetic way of life is its highly individual and non-institutional character. That diversity is exemplified in the following section focusing upon the transmission of spiritual authority.

It should be noted that male counterparts of non-institutionalized, middle-class female gurus are to be found on the Indian spiritual scene. Sathya Sai Baba, Sri Chinmoy, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, and Osho are such examples. Moreover, a superficial and rapid survey on Internet indicates that far more middle-class male spiritual teachers than middle-class female have received *sannyāsa* initiation, are associated with a formal teaching tradition (*sampradāya*), and make use of authoritative philosophical sources in their teachings. Further studies are needed to show whether or not male gurus tend to embrace traditional forms of institutionalized leadership to a greater extent than do female gurus.

## 2. Various forms of transmission of spiritual authority

The forms of transmission of spiritual authority from guru to disciple encountered in Indian female religiosity, which comprise the avenues women follow in order to become gurus, display a wide variety of expressions. In an afterword to the anthology *The Graceful Guru*, which portrays female Hindu gurus in India and the United States, Kathleen M. Erndl proposes a typology for its study (Erndl 2004: 246–248). Erndl outlines five different types of succession, and I will take her suggested typology as a starting point in presenting the different forms of spiritual transmission encountered within my sample of seventy women.

Erndl's typology is in no way exhaustive, nor is it unproblematic. As David Miller puts it, "The problem in studying Hinduism is that, just as the scholar believes that he has created a classification that includes all the data, other evidence emerges that calls into question the very structure of the classification itself" (Miller 1976–77: 530). This is especially true when considering the issue of transmission of spiritual authority among female spiritual masters. It should also be noted that

given that some of the categories overlap each other, they do not always fit neatly into Erndl's classification.

The first category of Erndl's typology of transmission of spiritual authority is one of "direct succession," where the guru is formally appointed into a *paraṃparā*, or spiritual lineage, by her own guru and continues the guru's mission in his or her *āśram*. Gurumayi Chidvilasananda (1955–) from Ganeshpuri belongs to this category. In February 1982, Gurumayi and her brother Nityananda were chosen by their spiritual master, *svāmī* Muktananda, to share the guru's seat. In the month of May the same year, and only five months before their guru's death, a ceremony (*paṭṭābhiṣeka*) took place, designating them as Muktananda's successors (Durgananda 1997: 118). Muktananda died on October 2nd, and sixteen days after his passing, Gurumayi and Nityananda were officially installed on the "seat" (*gaddi*) of the lineage (Durgananda 1997: 122–126). However, after two years of what Durgananda views as "discomfort in his role as guru," Nityananda resigned his guru position and Gurumayi is now recognized as Muktananda's successor in the *Siddha Yoga* lineage (Durgananda 1997: 130–131). The so-called "spiritual lineage" does not, however, appear to be as ancient as a lineage is supposed to be, and that issue has been the subject of controversies over the past two decades.

Another female guru who was chosen as her guru's successor is Chandra Kali Prasada, disciple of Sri Hanumat Kali Vara Babuji. Chandra Kali Prasada currently resides in *Kali Gardens Ashram* in Nambur outside Guntur (Andhra Pradesh).[183] Among the four spiritual masters presented in Chapter II, Madhobi Ma is the only woman claiming to have a "well-defined" religious affiliation, more specifically a *śākta* one. Although her religious affiliation appears to be eclectic, an amalgam of different spiritual orientations such as sufi, *śaiva*, *śākta*, and *vaiṣṇava* teachings, and although she has received spiritual instructions and initiations from six different *ācāryas*, she considers Shankar Khepa to be her sole guru (Swami Sidheshwarananda 1991: 14–17). Because of her Tantric affiliation, Madhobi Ma gives high priority to concepts such as *dīkṣā*, *paraṃparā*, and *sampradāya*.

Another form of transmission of spiritual authority through direct succession can be added: hereditary succession. Unlike all the other

[183] http://www.babuji.org/mathaji.htm

spiritual masters in the present thesis, it was neither choice nor personal spiritual efforts that primarily put Indira Betiji on the spiritual path, but heredity. Indira Betiji *gosvāmī* (1939–) from Vadodara was born in Surat (Gujarat) and is the direct descendent of Vallabhācārya, the fifteenth-century *vaiṣṇava* saint. She was given religious training by her grandfather who was the *ācārya* of the 6th seat of the Vallabhācārya *sampradāya* (Melwani 1997: 27). The Vallabhācārya *sampradāya* is one of the five main *vaiṣṇava*-traditions which institutionalized the *puṣṭimārga*, or the path (*mārga*) of divine grace (*puṣṭi*). The *puṣṭi*, literally "nourishment," was introduced by Vallabhācārya *gosvāmī* and indicates the special nourishment that the *jīva* (soul) receives when the grace of God descends on the disciple.[184] While hereditary succession, occurring primarily in *vaiṣṇava* contexts, appears to be a significant factor in terms of transmission of Hindu authority, Indira Betiji *gosvāmī* is the only woman in my sample who became a guru by birth.

The transmission of spiritual authority through direct succession is, however, not common among the female gurus in the present study. As Catherine Wessinger puts it, and as supported by my material, it is this type of religious authority that most often excludes women from leadership roles (Wessinger 1996: 9). That observation is echoed by Ursula King postulating that "the less differentiated religion and society are, the greater is the participation of women [and] the more institutionalized a religion becomes, the more it generally excludes women from positions of authority and power" (King 1993: 38).

The second form of succession suggested by Erndl is a "sideways succession" where the "lineage" of the guru is an offshoot of the primary "lineage." Ramakrishna, Sathya Sai Baba, and Papaji are male examples of that second form of transmission. In contrast to the first category, where the initiating spiritual master still has a central significance in *āśram* life and in the guru's teachings and religious practices, "sideways" gurus are more independent. I have noted that the women fitting that category might have received one or several initiations from one or several gurus, but they neither relate to any of them

[184] Vallabhācārya *saṁpradāya* was founded by Vallabha also called Vallabhācārya (1479–1531). Vallabha's vedantic teachings are known as *śuddhādvaita* ("pure" or "purified" nondualism). Vallabha "corrected" Śaṅkara's *advaita* by demonstrating that *māyā* is entirely a power of the Absolute (that is Kṛṣṇa).

as their sole gurus in an exclusive *guru-śiṣya* relationship, nor do they claim to be part of a spiritual lineage or to belong to a more or less "well-defined" formal spiritual tradition.

Anandmurti Gurumaa is a guru who I would claim fits this category of "sideways succession". When I mentioned to Anandmurti Gurumaa that rumors were circulating to the effect that she had received *sannyāsa* initiation when she was twenty seven years old, while other informants disagreed with that claim, she answered that both answers were right. According to her, she roamed alone to different holy places for some years in her teens in order to associate with like-minded people. Once she met a silent man with an ochre garb and asked him if he could give her *sannyāsa*. The man told her that he was not able to grant her wish because he himself had never been properly initiated. Anandmurti Gurumaa insisted, however, and presented him the ochre clothes she had brought with her. The old man touched the clothing and later on, during a stay in Rishikesh, she went to a solitary place by the Ganges-river and put the robes on. Anandmurti Gurumaa says that she considers this to have been her initiation.[185] As a general matter, a highly individual choice of lifestyle characterizes Anandmurti Gurumaa's life. Accordingly, she considers herself a guru in her own right and does not want to be associated with any specific religious tradition. This is mirrored in the variety of spiritual influences she draws upon. It is also reflected in her comment: "I had never taken training to be a Guru, nor did I want to do it now. I am what I am" (*Beyond the Mind*: 152).

Erndl labels the third way of transmitting spiritual authority "ambiguous succession." This is where the guru has received training from a recognized spiritual master but chooses not to exercise his or her role of guru. This is the case for some women who married men already established as gurus, but deliberately chose to remain in the shadow of their husbands. Common to all of them is that they never played any major spiritual role while their husbands were alive, but that they acquired a position of authority after their husbands' death. This is, for example, the case for Rajeshwari Devi (1930–1991), affectionately called Rajuli, who was born in Melgaon (Uttarakhand). She married Shri Hans Ji Maharaj but remained in the background of her

[185] Interview with Anandmurti Gurumaa in Gannaur (Haryana), 21.1.2006.

husband most of her life. However, she left behind her sheltered life after her husband passed away in 1966, and took the reins of his mission. Until her death, Rajuli resided in an *āśram* outside Haridvar where she was worshiped as an emanation of Bhagavatī. She delivered thousands of discourses in India and abroad, building *āśrams* and teaching devotees.[186] Another woman who stayed in the shadow of her husband is Rama Mata (1955–), the spiritual successor of her husband Sant Keshavadas. She resides in *Vishwa Shanti Ashram* in Bangalore (Karnataka).[187] Among the four women presented in Chapter II, Shakti Devi received initiation from a recognized male guru who became her husband, but unlike the women above, her husband is still living and she has become a guru in her own right.

The fourth case in Erndl's typology is that of "spontaneous succession" where the female spiritual master has no human guru. The most well-known examples of spontaneous succession are embodied in the life-stories of Anandamayi Ma (1896–1982) and Amritanandamayi (1953–), both known for having displayed trancelike behaviors already from childhood. Neither Amrita-nandamayi nor Anandamayi Ma was initiated by a guru, though Anandamayi Ma did self-initiate herself.

Finally, the fifth type of spiritual transmission found in female gurus' stories is what Erndl calls "posthumous visionary succession." This might occur in a dream or vision of a deceased or physically absent guru, or through a *mūrti* suddenly coming to life, or telepathically. It is closely related to auditory succession, i.e., initiation transmitted through a voice, believed to be divine. The idea that initiation can be granted by a deceased guru makes perfect sense to Indian believers, and is a frequently recurring theme in mystical contexts. Believed to possess supernatural powers, gurus are perceived as having the ability to contact their disciples telepathically even when they are no longer in their "physical body."

Shree Ma of Kamakhya, presently living in California, is a guru who has been the recipient of posthumous visionary succession. According to her disciple *swamī* Satyananda Saraswati, she received initiation from Ramakrishna, one hundred and fifty years after his death.

[186] http://www.manavdharam.org/mata_ji./sketch.html

[187] http://www.inthelight.co.nz/spirit/gurus/ramax002.htm

During adolescence, Shree Ma had to face difficulties from family members who could not understand her religious convictions. One day, she decided to run away from home, and when she was about to leave, she heard a voice coming from a picture of Jesus hanging over the door saying: "I am with you always. You don't need to run away to find me" (Satyananda Saraswati 1997: 27). We are told that the next day, her family had suddenly changed their mind, telling their daughter that they did not intend to interfere anymore with her religious aspirations. On a later occasion, when she was sitting in her family shrine room for meditation and worship, and looking at Ramakrishna's picture, Shree Ma heard Ramakrishna's voice speak clearly to her: "You must finish your college education. I have much work that must be done by you, and to accomplish that you must be educated" (Satyananda Saraswati 1997: 27). Another example of this kind of spiritual transmission is found in the life-story of Guru Ma Jyotishanand Saraswati, a woman from Rajasthan with a Jain background, nowadays living on Long Island outside New York, who claims to have been initiated by the god Hanumān.[188]

Although none of the four gurus presented in Chapter II have been the recipients of posthumous visionary succession, one of them does claim to have received initiation "telepathically" from a living guru. Sai Rajarajeshwari considers herself to be Sathya Sai Baba's disciple and claims that her latent divinity was awakened telepathically by him. When she was in her teens, Sathya Sai Baba appeared to her in a dream, showing her that she had a mission to accomplish on earth. In a vision, she also had a revelation that he had brought her down to this life through his own will (*SSRS* 1999: 66–67). Given that Sai Rajarajeshwari knew that Sathya Sai Baba never gave initiation to anyone, she decided to attend his *dārśan* for the first time in order to make sure that she had not misunderstood the message of the dream. The compilers of *SSRS* tell that at that time, Sathya Sai Baba used to end his spiritual discourses and *dārśan* sessions with a poem. However, on the day of Sai Rajarajeshwari's visit, Sathya Sai Baba deviated from his habit and chanted: "Aum Śri Rāmā, jaya Rāmā, jaya jaya Rāmā." Sai Rajarajeshwari interpreted this divergence from the usual procedure as a sign that he had answered her prayer (*SSRS* 1999: 165).

[188] http://www.vedicheritageinc.com/

## 3. The centrality of religious experience and enlightenment

Whereas in the past chapter, I examined a variety of female gurus' personal religious experiences, my intention now is to show how women use these experiences as the basis of their authority. Most female spiritual masters give spiritual instructions without being formally qualified to do so in terms of religious education or organisational affiliation. Moreover, they usually have no official positions as religious teachers. My experiences from my encounters with them show, however, that despite their roles not having been codified in accordance with traditional male perceptions, female gurus are taken seriously and receive ample recognition from both male and female followers. The question to consider is how we can we understand their success?

One observation that emerged while researching the present study is that most of the women do not primarily rely on scriptural texts as a source of knowledge, but instead emphasize experimental knowledge or direct experience of the divine. A comment from Anasuya Devi (1923 – 1985) from Jillellamudi (Andhra Pradesh) is particularly pertinent in that respect.

> Scriptures don't create experience in us; spiritual experience, however, creates scripture. There is no necessity that I should teach only what is in scripture. There is no need for me to verify whether what I say accords with scripture. For me, experience is primary. Experience is the only true authority. (Schiffman 2001: 334)

In other words, Anasuya Devi suggests that spiritual experience is superior to intellectual or rational knowledge, and like most female gurus in the present study, she acknowledges that it is through a direct experience of the sacred that one is able to cut across conventional social channels such as education and formal religious position.

As previously noted in the introduction to Chapter II, by the times of the Vedas, the guru was considered as *ācārya*, or teacher and transmitter of spiritual knowledge, and his teachings had a didactic character. Over time, however, the Vedic teacher, who possessed his status by virtue of scholarly knowledge or birth, was replaced by gu-

rus emphasizing spiritual salvation and whose charismatic qualities were based on personal enlightenment. The notion of enlightenment, also called *mokṣa*, "liberation," *mukti*, "release," or *brahman* is of primary importance in that respect. According to William Mahony, enlightenment, or a permanent state of oneness, refers to "that existentially transformative experience in which one reaches complete and thorough understanding of the nature of reality and gains control over those psychic proclivities that determine the apparent structures and dynamics of the world" (Mahony 1987: 107). *Mokṣa*, primarily referring to liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth (*saṃsāra*) through the dissolution of the *ego* (*ahaṃkāra*), has always been highly idealized in Indian spirituality. Based on the belief that the self is of divine nature, it is considered the highest goal a human being can achieve.

To "realize the self" is thus a common topic in most ancient and venerated texts which helps make gurus appeal to most spiritual seekers. The issue of a permanent supreme reality, or *brahman* unaffected by change is discussed throughout the *upaniṣads*. In its nondual philosophical interpretation (*advaita vedānta*), the concept refers to a fundamental kinship between the individual soul, or *ātman*, and the universal soul, *brahman*, which it seeks to realize. *Brahman* is often referred to as *sat* (being), *cit* (consciousness), and *ānanda* (bliss).

Scriptural sources indicate that in exceptional cases, *mokṣa* may be realized spontaneously but that it is more generally achieved through spiritual practices (*sādhana*). Through different phases of *sādhana* such as worship, meditation, mantra repetition, and energy transmission, the adept is believed to experience gradual levels of *samādhi*, leading, at best, to permanent enlightenment. *Samādhi* or "absorption" is a term used in Hindu yogic meditation that connotes a heightened state of consciousness characterized by total awareness without thought.

In different yoga traditions, *samādhi* states are described according to different schemes. The most well known of these is found in the Yogasūtras where Patañjali identifies the following levels of *samādhi*: *samprajñātasamādhi* ("with consciousness") and *asamprajñātasamādhi* ("without consciousness") (Patañjali 1983: 108–112). In most *āśrams* I have visited, three distinct levels of *samādhi* are generally referred to by gurus and followers: *savikalpasamādhi*, *nirvikalpasamādhi*, and *sahajasamādhi*. According to Yogananda, *savikalpasamādhi* is an initial stage

of consciousness where identification with the body and a sense of duality remain (Yogananda 1997: 109). In the second stage of *nirvikalpasamādhi*, characterizing the enlightened state, duality is said to disappear, entailing that there is no more identification with the body, or attachment to the physical world. In *nirvikalpasamādhi*, one is said to remain fully functional in the physical world. As Yogananda puts it, "In that perfect and unshakable state of consciousness, a yogi finds no difficulty in performing any of his worldly duties" (Yogananda 1997: 24). The third level of *samādhi* is identified as *sahajasamādhi*, or "natural," "effortless" *samādhi*, and is perceived as an undifferentiated state of being-ness or oneness, described as permanent and natural.[189]

Enlightenment is referred to in most of the female gurus' biographies, hagiographies, and other accounts from devotees' experiences, but is never presented in great detail. One reason might be that most biographical and hagiographical accounts are written by disciples. Given that followers do not have any experience of enlightenment, they do not claim to be able to write about it properly. Another plausible reason might be that given that humility is considered one of Hinduism's central virtues, speaking of one's own experiences of enlightenment, thus suggesting that one might be enlightened, is regarded as a boastful sign of *ego*. A third reason is that it might create expectations among followers to have specific kinds of experiences. Also relevant in this context is that enlightenment is said to be beyond words and therefore unable to be grasped verbally.

A few references to enlightenment can however, be found in some female gurus' accounts, as for example Indira Devi's biography. Indira Devi (ca. 1920–1998) was born into an affluent and highly cultured family from West Punjab (nowadays Pakistan) and became a classical dancer. She married, and in 1946, she met her guru Dilip Kumar Roy (1897–1980). Dilip Kumar Roy was a famous musician, singer, writer, and philosopher. He was also one of Aurobindo's disciples and embraced *sannyāsa* when he was thirty one years old. In the monograph, *Pilgrims of the Stars*, written by him together with Indira Devi, Indira Devi gives an account of the different *samādhi*-states, or different types of deepening of consciousness that she experienced during her

[189] Eliade states that *sahaja* is a "nonconditioned state of *samādhi*" characterizing the spontaneity of the *jīvanmukta* (Eliade 1969: 239–240).

*sādhana* before realizing what seems to be a state of permanent enlightenment.

Indira Devi differentiates three different levels of *samādhi*: *bhāvasamādhi*, *savikalpasamādhi*, and *nirvikalpasamādhi*. In *bhāvasamādhi*, she claims that she experienced complete absorption without losing consciousness completely. She records that she lost visual clarity and that things were experienced as distant shadows. In that state, she experienced great ecstasy as well as deep yearning (*viraha*). During the stage of *savikalpasamādhi*, she claims to have become free from thoughts and free from bodily bondage, experiencing a kind of expansion above the body. However, she says that in that state, a sense of duality and "I" remained (Roy and Devi 1973: 238–239). At the age of thirty-seven, her state of consciousness deepened and she finally had several spiritual experiences of what is known as *nirvikalpasamādhi*.

> There was no *I* left, no one to experience – no form, no duality, neither God nor devotee. She had lost all consciousness to *become* consciousness. There was just Bliss and one vast Reality that reigned – beyond all thought, all description, all imagination. Time stopped – or rather there was no time – yet after a while, she came back to the shadow of that reality, this world. (Roy and Devi 1973: 247)

As far as I am aware, the above can be considered to be a description of the enlightened state. The followers of Kalki and Amma, who will be referred to at the end of this section, claim that when one is established in the state of *nirvikalpasamādhi*, one might still be subject to trancelike states associated with experiences of bliss, making one occasionally dysfunctional, i.e., unable to function properly in everyday life. However, when the state of *sahajasamādhi* is realized, one is both permanently established in the highest state of oneness and at the same time, fully functional in everyday life.[190] This is what Dilip Kumar Roy and Indira Devi express in the following account:

[190] During an early phase of the establishment of their spiritual movement, Kalki and Amma used to view different levels of enlightenment.
See for example http://skyboom1.tripod.com/index38.html

> In the beginning, Indira found it very difficult to adjust herself to normal consciousness after her return. It was as though she were being tossed between heaven and earth. Having experienced that indescribable bliss, how could one be satisfied with anything else? Dada [Dilip Kumar Roy] told her that it could be stabilized only when the outer being was completely transformed. (Roy and Devi 1973: 239)

The enlightened state is said to be indescribable, and Anandmurti Gurumaa, portrayed in Chapter II, agrees. Anandmurti Gurumaa, who realized enlightenment at the age of sixteen, claims that it cannot be described but has to be experienced. Even if it could be described, she says, she would not do so given that everybody has different experiences of it. Anandmurti Gurumaa likens enlightenment, or "birth of the self", with the birth of a child. Although she does acknowledge that the experience of enlightenment can not be put into words, she also claims that in both cases, one is aware of the very moment when it happens:

> You know when it happens. It is not that you don't know. It does not happen to you in your sleep. You know it. You were looking for it, you were waiting, and the waiting turned out to be a long one. And you are waiting every second for that, and you are working for that day in and day out, night in and night out. You are working hard, you are working on yourself. You are working and working for that single moment of explosion, that explosion which moves you into the stages of infinity. How can you miss it?[191]

Anandmurti Gurumaa also claims that true enlightenment is irreversible. She declares that "Once the atom has been brought to that point where it explodes, you can't reverse it" (Varughese and Kalra 2005).[192] Note that throughout the text, I do not write "people who have reached the enlightened state" but "people who have realized or achieved the enlightened state." Most of the gurus I have spoken with acknowledge that it is never a matter of reaching something outside

191 Interview with Anandmurti Gurumaa in Gannaur (Haryana), 21.1.2006.

192 http://lifepositive.com/Spirit/Guru/Spirituality_Equips_you_to_Live52005.asp

or wandering somewhere far away, but instead of becoming the person one already is, the true self beyond the *ego*.

Another example of the enlightened state among the women portrayed in Chapter II is reflected in accounts found in Sai Rajarajeshwari's (Lalitha's) life-story. In some parts of *SSRS*, we can read that she achieved "that exalted state of Truth by the grace of God" and that "she finally reached the state of complete surrender of the self," expressions suggesting that she might be enlightened (*SSRS* 1999: 65). In other accounts, however, we find descriptions of the "agony of the separation" (*SSRS* 1999: 214), a "storm of great internal turmoil" (*SSRS* 1999: 73), "deep yearning to become one with God" (*SSRS* 1999: 221), and the necessity to surrender completely (*SSRS* 1999: 81). As far as I am aware, these latter descriptions can be seen as having to do with an unenlightened state.

According to Sai Rajarajeshwari's hagiography, however, these signs of inner torment have nothing to do with an unenlightened state. It is claimed that while ordinary persons can only "rise" from a lower level of consciousness to a higher one, Sai Rajarajeshwari has the ability to "descend" from a higher level of consciousness to a lower one. That is why "mental turmoil" affects her (*SSRS* 1999: 77). Her hagiography underlines that in her role of *avatār*, she is supposed to mingle with ordinary people and adjust to their spiritual level in order to provide them with spiritual guidance:

> Amma did not take birth in order to move upwards, or to evolve to higher stages of spirituality like ordinary mortals. As per Bhagwan Baba's Divine Will, She has descended from the highest level of divinity to the lower human level. If She were to constantly exist in a state of higher consciousness, it would become impossible for Her to engage in worldly transactions and function like an ordinary human being. Amma says, "How can a common person understand how difficult it is for the Avatar to descend from a higher plane to a lower plane and remain there?" (*SSRS* 1999: 35)
>
> Lalitha would constantly chew betel leaf with arecanut. Perhaps She did this to come down from spiritual heights to the ordinary human level, so that She could participate in the activities of daily life. Mother Sharada Devi too had

> realized that if she were to constantly remain in spiritual heights, she would not be able to complete the purpose of her birth, which was to work for the deliverance of the common man. Hence she took it upon herself to greatly love a girl called Radha, who was her relative. She had Willed to feel an interest in Radha, and by this arrangement she was able to understand the life of ordinary people and help to alleviate their suffering. (*SSRS* 1999: 220)

My informant, Mohan Rao, agrees with the idea that we cannot understand Sai Rajarajeshwari's enlightenment because we are not enlightened ourselves. However, he believes that his guru is permanently immersed in the equanimous and peaceful state of mind that characterizes enlightenment.[193] According to Sai Rajarajeshwari's life-story (*SSRS*), Sai Rajarajeshwari's birth was not the result of the residue of the karma of past births. Accordingly, she has not taken birth to become liberated from future births. Believed to have been born an *avatār* in accordance with the will of Sathya Sai Baba, and understood as *ādiparaśakti* or the original *śakti* form, she is said to have the mission of liberating mankind from bondage (*SSRS* 1999: 83–84).

Shakti Devi, presented in Chapter II, is another guru whose spiritual experiences have been described to me to some extent. Shakti Devi told me that she had a strong spiritual awakening in January, 1991, when she still was employed at a state company. She remembers that one month before her awakening, her brother suddenly fell ill and died, but that she felt no affliction.[194] She had also a strong experience of Māriyammaṉ in a dream after which, she claims, she could see the goddess everywhere. At that time, she thought such visions were a creation of her mind.[195] In January 1991, however, she experienced a huge change in her consciousness happening in a very natural way. She started experiencing mental clarity, "peace of mind," and more confidence in herself, together with an increasing love for God and mankind. She also noticed that dreams she had at nights came true.[196] Nowadays, she claims that thoughts and worries can still sometimes pass through her mind but do not affect her negatively as

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[193] Interview with Mohan Rao in Mysore (Karnataka), 5.2. 2006.
[194] Field notes, (Tamil Nadu), 5.2.2004.
[195] Field notes, (Tamil Nadu), 2.3.2004.
[196] E-mail from Shakti Devi, 24.8.2005.

they dissolve almost instantaneously. She still, however, does not know if she wants to call this shift of mind "awakening" or "enlightenment." In Madhobi Ma's case, also portrayed in Chapter II, the issue of enlightenment has not been explicitly raised but is taken for granted by her followers and is hinted at by the guru herself (Khanna 2002b: 146).

Traditionally, achieving *mokṣa* is not only described as the highest goal, but also as the most difficult endeavor a human being can undertake. However, there are persons who have challenged and still challenge that statement. The most controversial Indian gurus in that respect are perhaps a married couple from Andhra Pradesh, known as "Kalki," or "Bhagavan," and "Amma". Kalki (1949–) was born in Tamil Nadu and had strong spiritual inclinations since early childhood. He graduated in mathematics in Chennai and worked for an insurance company and as a teacher in several public schools. In 1991 he established the *Foundation for World Awakening* whose goal is to liberate mankind from suffering and to spread happiness, peace, and love through global enlightenment. Kalki and Amma believe that we are at the end of *kaliyuga*, waiting for the Golden Age expected to arrive in 2011–2012. For this purpose, between 60,000 and 80,000 enlightened persons are needed as soon as possible, as it is believed that this number will be enough to enlighten the rest of the planet.[197] Kalki and Amma believe that when 60,000 people are enlightened, each of them will be able to provide salvation to as many as 300 persons a day.

The most sensational statement in Kalki and Amma's message is that enlightenment is not primarily considered a mystical phenomenon, but instead a bio-neurological process happening in the left side of the brain, more exactly in the *corpus callosum*. Similar theories are found among the founders of the so-called "Neurotheology." Viewing enlightenment as a neurological process was first introduced in the United States by the neurologist James H. Austin who explored the interplay between religious experiences and brain function. In 1982, and after having spent eight years training the practice of Zen meditation, Austin is said having achieved enlightenment without any forewarning when he was waiting in the underground in London. He lost

[197] The sources of information are from my participation in courses for beginners, *Mukti I*, *Mukti II*, and *Mukti III* in June, November, and December 2002 in Sweden, and informal talks with teachers and devotees.

his experience of a separate I-identity, was overwhelmed by an eternity-feeling characterized by the absence of fear, and started feeling deep inner peace (Austin 1998: 536–539).[198]

## 4. Charismatic authority

The exceptional status and centrality of enlightenment in Indian spirituality is closely related to the issue of charismatic authority. The term "charisma," originally from the ancient Greek *charis* can be translated as "grace, kindness, favor," or a "gift," especially a gift of God (Parrinder 1987: 218). It was later adopted by Christianity in order to describe abilities such as prophecy, healing, and exceptional wisdom, believed having been bestowed by God (Conger 1991: 22). In one of her published letters describing her spiritual experiences, Ma Indira Devi, who became a guru after her master's death, gives the following definition of the guru-principle:

> An Indian Guru is not just the Head of the Institution or Monastery, he *is* the institution. In the former case one goes to a certain Monastery or takes to an order and then loves the Head of the place, but in the later, one goes to the Guru and resides in the Ashram because of him. There can be no Ashram, properly speaking, after the passing of the Guru. The disciples may stay on in the Ashram building for the sake of convenience, but that is all. (Roy and Devi 1982: 9)

This statement is echoed by the scholar David Miller who published a paper bearing the revealing title "The guru as the centre of sacredness," stating that "the dynamic, sacred centre of Hinduism is, in fact, the enlightened guru, whose charismatic leadership creates the institution for philosophical, religious, and social change" (Miller 1976–77: 527).

One scholar who has explored the issue of charismatic authority is the German sociologist Max Weber. Weber found that from time to time, a single individual could revolutionize history, not by the power

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[198] The interplay between mystical experiences and the brain has been explored by James H. Austin in his monograph, *Zen and the Brain: Toward an Understanding of Meditation and Consciousness*, Cambridge (Massachusetts) 1998.

of institutional authority but by the force of his personality. In *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, Max Weber makes a tripartite division of ideal types of authority figures, distinguishing between traditional, legal, and charismatic modes of authority. According to him, traditional authority relies upon traditions, habits, and customs regulating human behavior. Rational or legal authority is the bureaucratic form of administration "resting on the 'legality' of patterns of normative rules" (Weber 1969: 328). Charismatic authority, common in religious groups, derives its authority from charisma (Weber 1969: 328).

Weber distinguishes what he calls routinized charisma, referring to partial institutionalization such as priesthood, and pure charisma, a non-institutional, spontaneous, and dynamic form of leadership resisting institutional influences and characterizing saints, gurus, or prophets (Weber 1969: 363–366; 358–363). Weber states that "the term 'charisma' will be applied to a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities" (Weber 1969: 358). According to that view, charisma is understood as an aura or emanation of supernatural origin, giving power and authority to a spiritual leader. Charisma is sometimes used for human qualities without reference to its supernatural aspect such as, for example, "the Kennedy charisma" (Parrinder 1987: 218).

Max Weber gives a fivefold description of charisma. First, he claims that charisma is based upon the observations of believers reporting the extraordinary qualities, spiritual gifts, and supernatural or superhuman powers shown by a particular individual. It is this recognition of a leader as gifted with sacrality that gives validity to charisma. From the charismatic leader's perspective, the calling to a charismatic mission has to be recognized and is characterized by a sense of spiritual duty (Weber 1969: 359).

Second, and as a consequence of Weber's first statement, if the charismatic qualification fails, the leader might think that he or she has lost his or her power. Accordingly, if his or her authority disappears and fails to benefit people, the followers might abandon their spiritual leader (Weber 1969: 360).

Third, Weber states that a group with a charismatic leader is ruled by "an emotional form of communal leadership" (Weber 1969: 360). The administrative staff of a charismatic leader is not chosen on the basis of social privilege, or domestic or personal dependency, but rather in terms of the charismatic qualities of its members. There is no emphasis on official powers or career, no promotion, no hierarchy, but instead, a communal relationship, supported by voluntary gifts or donations. Charismatic authority is thus "outside the real of everyday routine and the profane sphere" and is non rational and non bureaucratic (Weber 1969: 361).

Fourth, charismatic authority, or what Weber calls "pure charisma," i.e. associated with a "calling" or mission, is, at least theoretically, unaffected by economic considerations such as acquisitions, or property (Weber 1947: 362).

Fifth, Weber claims that during certain periods, charisma has proven to be the greatest revolutionary force. Charisma involves a subjective or internal re-orientation of the personality which can be born of suffering, inner conflicts, or enthusiasm. It might imply an entirely new orientation in life in terms of values and attitudes (Weber 1969: 363).

In line with Max Weber's statements, what emerges from my sample of seventy contemporary female gurus is that women assert their spiritual status on the strength of their personal charisma rather than on institutional authority. In other words, I claim that it is not primarily sectarian affiliation (*sampradāya*), or appointment through a formal lineage (*paraṃparā*) that gives legitimacy and authority to gurus' religious involvement but their charisma. Charisma refers to the guru's personality, inner qualities, and special insights into what is viewed as absolute knowledge by followers.

Moreover, and still in line with Weber's assessments, my material indicates that spiritual awakening is followed by a "calling," a sense of "mission," or "spiritual duty," which constitutes the driving force behind female gurus' religious involvement. Having tasted the joy of inner peace and happiness, most gurus acknowledge that they feel a need, or at least a responsibility, to share that experience with others.

When a female guru is recognized for her spiritual attainment, a monastic organization generally starts growing around her person, and that organization is supported by voluntary gifts or donations.

The centrality of the guru as spiritual authority is so significant that it is not unusual that a flourishing *āśram* weakens and eventually decays when the guru dies. The question of whether the charismatic qualities characterizing the seventy female spiritual masters in the present study might be considered as a great "revolutionary force" will be investigated in the next to last chapter of my thesis.

The centrality of charismatic authority in female religiosity is generally acknowledged by scholars from different religious fields. Kathleen M. Erndl states that "although they [female gurus] are absolutely central (not marginal) to Hindu religious life, their authority as gurus is essentially dependent on their personal charisma" (Erndl 2004: 246). That statement is echoed by Pat Holden who argues that whereas women have been excluded from leadership roles in Christianity, there is one role which has always been open to them: the role of visionary, mystic, or prophet (Holden 1983: 1). Similarly, Ursula King argues that women hold leadership positions in non-institutionalized forms of religion as shamans, healers, visionaries, mediums, mystics, saints, and seers (King 1993: 37; 1995: 16).

## 5. Female spiritual leadership, legitimacy, authority, and power

In the introductory part of the present chapter, I asked if female gurus participate in religious life in the same way as men do, thus implicitly wondering if they are given equal status as men in religious matters. The term "status" is closely associated with authority and power, and I would like to conclude the present chapter by saying some words about this issue.

Most theologians and anthropologists of gender studies draw a distinction between "power" and "authority." According to Rita Gross, "Authority, which is men's prerogative, is the right to command and to be obeyed. Power is the ability to influence how things happen, even though one does not [have] the formal authority to determine what is done" (Gross 2000: 108).[199] In other words, Gross suggests that whereas authority is the prerogative of men, power is usually held by both men and women.

[199] Note 1.

When examining decision-making processes, the anthropologist Eleanor Leacock claims that whereas authority is characterized by being "enacted through publicly recognized institutions," power is understood as "influence exerted through informal channels" (Leacock 1986: 109). Phrased differently, authority is the legal right or sovereign duty to do something, while power is the ability to back up that right or duty. Authority is related to the law, what is right and what is wrong, while power is defined in correlation with charisma. Authority focuses upon organizational structure while power has to do, among other things, with human qualities such as spiritual knowledge, empathetic ability, or psychological and physical strength. One can have authority and no power, or have power without authority. In other words, the dichotomy authority vs. power is what distinguishes institutional from charismatic authority.

My material indicates that whereas most Indian female gurus have always been deeply involved in religious life, they rarely held positions of institutional authority. One reason why Indian women have been barred from participating in authoritative religious positions is because of their supposed ritual impurity. However, despite the fact that Indian women's religious life is sometimes said to have been restricted since the time of Manusmṛti, my study indicates that women found and still find their own avenues to practice their religiosity. That view is reflected in Susan Wadley's comment that "Hindu women have considerable religious involvement. Women as non-specialists are 'invisible' religious practitioners, since most of their observances are performed non-publicly (in the home or 'domestic' sphere) and their role is not textually sanctioned; indeed the Laws of Manu forbid a woman to fast or participate in rituals without her husband. Yet, if we look at folk religious practices rather than Hinduism in texts, women, along with "low-caste" men, are the primary actors" (Wadley 1992: 126).

Contrary to traditional institutional authority where studies of scriptural texts, formal initiation, and religious affiliation have been considered to be normative avenues for gaining public recognition, the women in the present study strongly emphasize individual spiritual experience in order to legitimate their positions of leadership. That spiritual experience, further emphasized by the power of *śakti* they are believed to embody, grants status to women who do not have

access to authoritative means of power. It gives credibility to their religious activities and has proven to benefit their situation by providing a solution to the social tensions and asymmetry of power suffered by them. As Rita Gross puts it, "Women often have considerable power in patriarchal societies, even though they have little or no authority" (Gross 2000: 108).[200] That view is echoed by Caroline Walker Bynum who claims that whereas medieval male Christian saints were guided by "ecclesiastical or even secular office," female saints owed their power to charismatic qualities (Bynum 1986 b: 259–260).

This is also acknowledged by Richard A. Hutch who writes as follows:

> Generally, the charismatic appeal of women religious leaders originates precisely in personal self-process linked to experiences of the sacred, while that of men, as sociologists suggest, is more bound to social elements supporting religious organizational interests. (Hutch 1984: 162)

While a few female gurus in the present study acquire their spiritual authority through succession, or, in one exception, through heredity, we can see that most of them enact it by divine sanction. As I see it, several factors are involved in that process. First, female gurus receive divine validation because their direct, unmediated experience of the divine is believed to come from God. As such, no stronger justification for their role could possibly be required. Moreover, the established tradition of male asceticism contributes to giving their vocation credibility. Accordingly, embracing an ascetic or ascetic-like way of living, as men do, sanctions a woman's decision to detach herself from family and social norms, legitimating her right to autonomy, giving her public recognition and power, and sanctioning her role as spiritual leader (Misset-van de Weg: 50–51). In other words, the fact that women have been excluded from formal religious leadership because of their gender seems to be precisely the reason why they have gained so much power among followers. The freedom of not being affiliated with any formal institution is appealing to many, and that absence of bondage gives them a flexible, creative, and innovative approach to all

[200] Note 1.

traditions. This is what Katherine Young expresses in the following quotation:

> Because of the lack of institutional roles […], women have had greater opportunity to be flamboyant and free-spirited. This gives them an extraordinary power in the eyes of those who are constrained by norms *and institutions* (even those designed to upset norms). (Young 2000: 28-29)

All of the four women presented in Chapter II have, in one way or another, been successful in their attempts to assume positions of spiritual leadership. They claim spiritual authority and have been able to spread their religious message to an increasing number of followers during the past decades. Anandmurti Gurumaa has founded a head *āśram*, spread over twenty-two acres in Gannaur, forty kilometers outside Delhi. As noted earlier, the *āśram* is relatively new and still in full expansion, and currently comprises Gurumaa's residence, gardens, temples, an office building, a book shop, meditation halls, a kitchen building, housing for five hundred visitors at time, a café, and *gośāl*. Anandmurti Gurumaa has established meditation centers all over India but has chosen to build only one *āśram*. Anandmurti Gurumaa tours India several times a year and leads meditation camps regularly in the USA or UK.

Madhobi Ma founded the *Matrika Ashram* in a well-to-do South Delhi area in 1984. Every month, she travels to Tanakpur (Uttarakhand) with her *svāmī* and spends fifteen days in *Sri Adya Shakti Pith*, an *āśram* she has established in the Himalayan forest, one hundred kilometers from the border of China. Around fifteen to sixteen persons permanently reside in the *āśram* which also welcomes temporary visitors.[201] Madhobi Ma estimates the number of her followers to be between one hundred thousand and one hundred fifty thousand, not including uninitiated followers. Every year, she goes abroad in the month of June. Besides centers in India, she has established centers in Switzerland, Germany, Croatia, and the UK, and has toured Europe a number of times, delivering lectures and conducting meditation camps. She plans to travel soon to the USA.[202]

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[201] Interview with Madhobi Ma in Delhi, 29.10.2001.

[202] Field notes, Delhi, 30.10.2001.

According to Sai Rajarajeshwari's website, the number of her devotees, although unknown to me, is said to be increasing continuously, and her spiritual and charitable activities, carried out through the *Srimad Sai Rajarajeshwari Trust*, are expanding. In order to accommodate the steadily increasing number of devotees, the *Srimad Sai Rajarajeshwari Spiritual Centre* in Karekura village, located outside Mysore, is under construction. A temple and a kitchen have already been completed and meditation halls and residence for visiting devotees are also planned for the near future. The trust assists villagers with food and clothes, conducts educational programs for village children, funding some of them with scholarships, uniforms, and school books, and has counseling programs for survivors of suicide attempts.[203]

Shakti Devi has established an *āśram* registered as a public charitable trust, a non-profit organization, in her home. She usually rents a hall in the city for larger gatherings and public programs such as special religious celebrations. She estimates the number of her followers to be between six and eight hundred people but her goal is to reach more people for worship, transmission of spiritual energy, and spiritual guidance.[204] While Shakti Devi does not feel attracted by the idea of setting up an *āśram* outside her home, her wish is to collect enough money in the future to construct of a prayer-hall or a meditation center.

Whereas most scriptural authority excludes women from having access to sacred texts and from participating in Vedic rituals, the very fact that women hold leadership positions in contemporary Hinduism inverts that picture to a large extent. Nowadays, women demand full participation and public recognition for their religious activities, and my material indicates that in order to do so, female gurus frequently discard scriptural restrictions, and sometimes consciously and actively oppose them. One of the first gurus to challenge female exclusion from religious involvement was Godavari Ma (1914–1990). The initiative was taken in the 1920s by her male guru, Upasani Baba, who established the *Kanyā Kumarī Sthān* in Sakori (Maharastra), an *āśram* for young female celibates. After her guru's death, Godavari Ma was put in the charge of the *sthān*. According to H.S. Muley, the actual assis-

[203] http://geocities.com/Tokyo/Bridge/1968/jk/brochure/sld002.htm?20059
[204] Field notes, (Tamil Nadu), 3.2.2004.

tant manager of the *āśram*, there are fifty *kanyās* (*brahmacariṇīs*) being rigorously trained for a period of twelve years in the *āśram*. They receive Sanskrit training for three hours each day, read and memorize *śāstras*, and are allowed to perform Vedic sacrifices such as *yajñas* or sacrificial fires seven times a year, and *satkarmas* to gods and goddesses. Throughout the day, they perform *āratī*, recite Vedic mantras, and perform Kṛṣṇa *pūjā*, a traditional ritual normally only performed by *brāhmaṇs*.[205]

Another guru who encouraged women's involvement in religious practices was Anandamayi Ma (1896–1982), who inspired women to become *brahmacāriṇīs* or to follow the path of renunciation (*sannyāsa*) traditionally closed to them. Anandamayi Ma established the *Kanyapith*, a Sanskrit school for girls (*kanyās*) aged five to twelve. She also arranged for a few women to participate in the Vedic ceremony of *upanayana*, with the investiture of the sacred thread and the recitation of the *gāyatrī* mantra (Lipski 1996:57). Moreover, she authorized five or six of them to give *dīkṣā* to followers (Lassel Hallstrom 1999: 151). These female disciples are nowadays spiritual masters in their own right. Indira Betiji has taken the initiative of establishing the *Sadhvī Śakti Pariṣad*, an organization gathering *sadhvīs* from various religious traditions. In September 2001, between fifty and sixty women gathered at her temple in Manjalpur, a suburb of Vadodara, under her leadership as acting president.[206]

Similarly, Amritanandamayi from Kerala encourages women to participate in religious activities traditionally practiced by men, as she strongly believes that woman's freedom should not only be preached but also practiced. In 1997, she caught the attention of the media when she appointed *brahmacāriṇīs* as female priestesses (*pūjārinīs*) at the temples of Kaimanam and Kodungallur in Kerala. In newspapers, one could read the following headlines: "Kerala Women Priests Practice Spiritual Equality" and "Women Priests in Kerala end Men Monopoly" (Cornell 2001: 137). Whereas male Hindu priests and scholarly *paṇḍits* protested, people came to visit her temples as never before (Cornell 2001: 137–138). Moreover, she established the right to worship in the *sanctum sanctorum*, and encourages women to perform

[205] Field notes, Sakori (Maharashtra), 24.11.2001.
[206] Field notes, Vadodara (Gujarat), 19.11.2001.

Vedic rituals and to recite Vedic mantras. Amritanandamayi not only valorizes women through her teachings and advice, she also acts as a role model through her own example. She performs the consecration ceremony herself for all the temples built in her *āśrams*, thus taking on a role traditionally reserved for male *brāhmaṇa* priests (Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi 1992: 40).

Of the women portrayed in Chapter II, Anandmurti Gurumaa is the one who most vehemently condemns the exclusion of women from positions of religious authority. She claims that there was, and still is, a Hindu ritual traditionally considered particularly fit for women: *vrata*-worship on the occasion of the *Karva Chauth* festival, where a woman is supposed to fast for her husband's long life. Not without an ironical undertone, Anandmurti Gurumaa questions this religious practice when asking: "has any one of them [women] ever tried to think if there is a fast – it could be for even half a day – where the man prays for his wife's long life?", thus challenging a thousand-year-old and widespread religious tradition of what she views as women's overly submissive attitude towards men (*Shakti*: 16).

Despite female gurus' demands for full participation in religious life, it sometimes happens that they feel the need to authenticate their charismatic authority, or are asked to do so, by someone holding a high religious position or by publicly recognized institutions. An example is the case of Jnanananda Sarasvathi from Chennai, one woman who is included in my sample. Jnanananda Sarasvathi claims that she has been fully enlightened since the age of five.[207] When she was forty three years old, she was asked by the "Divine," a voice which had been guiding her through her spiritual life, to take *sannyāsa*. She was asked to convey the message to Jayendra Saraswati, the Śaṅkarācārya, or pontiff, of one of the most prestigious Indian religious institutions, the *Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham* of Kanchipuram (*The Divine Descent* 1976: 26).

On August 29, 1972, Jnanananda Sarasvathi met Jayendra Saraswati Swamigal who told her that while her desire to take *sannyāsa* would soon be fulfilled, she should live in her home for the time being and wait until her family fully agreed with her decision (*The Divine Descent* 1976: 29). On May 25, 1976, she received her *sannyāsa* initiation

[207] Field notes, Chennai (Tamil Nadu), 29.10.1999.

and a new name, Sri Jnanananda Sarasvathi (*The Divine Descent* 1976: 33). Jnanananda Sarasvathi is the only woman ever to have been allowed to take *sannyāsa* initiation by the current head teacher of this well-renowned *advaita* institution. Charles White claims that "this exception was granted because the Shankaracharya recognized her as a fully realized jnani – one who knows experientially through mystical states of consciousness the deepest truths of Advaita Hinduism" (White 1989: 16).

My experience of encountering Jnanananda Sarasvathi and her devotees suggests, however, that it is her personality, rather than the initiation she received from a religious specialist representing a prestigious religious tradition, that attracts people to her. It should be said in passing that this was not the first time that a head teacher from a Śaṅkara monastery granted a woman blessings. According to Linda Johnsen, the "arch conservative" Śaṅkarācārya of Sringeri authorized a Jewish-born woman, initiated as Lakshmi Devi, to found the *Lakshmi Devi Ashram* in Pennsylvania (Johnsen 1988: 22–23).

The choice to associate onself with institutional religious authorities in order to gain social respectability and acceptance is also illustrated by the example of Amritanandamayi from Kerala. As noted earlier, despite her "low-caste" origins, Amritanandamayi nowadays receives exceptional public recognition on the strength of her charisma. Although she enjoys great popularity, she has been keen to connect her organization with a formal monastic order in order to strengthen the foundation of her powerful charitable non-profit organization, the *Mata Amritanandamayi Math and Mission Trust*, and to invest it with authority.[208] Accordingly, she has instituted a staff of traditionally initiated male and female *sannyāsins*, to help her to manage her numerous worldwide religious activities. Like Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, the *sannyāsins* of her head *āśram* in Kerala are members of the Totapurī order, one of the *daśanāmī sampradāya* or "ten names orders" of the authoritative monastic tradition believed to have been instituted by Śaṅkarācārya in the eighth century CE.[209] Such a strategy seems to reflect a certain degree of caution on her part, given that she

[208] Field notes, Amritapuri (Kerala), 31.12.2000.

[209] Field notes, Amritapuri (Kerala), 31.12.2000.

may have as much to lose from the disruption of formal institutional authority as she has to gain.

Interestingly, the success enjoyed by female gurus is not necessarily proportional to their spiritual abilities, the size of their following, or level of recognition from Indian and western followers. My experience of meeting seventy female gurus indicates that far from all the women wish to receive public recognition, to tour abroad, or to see their religious activities expand internationally. When I asked Jnanananda Sarasvathi from Chennai why she received so few devotees in her home (about fifty), she answered that it is not her duty to make her mission expand. "Better helping three persons properly than to do a bad job for thousands" she answered. To my question if she would tour abroad if she were invited by westerners, she answered that she has received many invitations of that kind in her life but has so far refused, as the "divine voice" leading her spiritual life has not commanded her to do so.[210]

In the same vein, Archanapuri Ma acknowledges that her followers are few in number because she is more interested in quality than quantity.[211] This is echoed by Madhobi Ma, presented in Chapter II, for whom the idea of going overseas was not attractive at all at the beginning of her spiritual career. She used to say: "If you have not achieved anything in your own country why to go to other countries?", thus giving priority to the establishment of her Indian temple in Tanakpur (Swami Sidheshwarananda 2001).[212] She has since toured Europe a couple of times.

Equating success with a large following is also questioned by Anandmurti Gurumaa, portrayed in Chapter II. As mentioned previously, Anandmurti Gurumaa removed the question about the estimated number of her followers from my list of interview-questions, thus leaving this question unanswered. In one of her publications, however, she asks provocatively: "Who says that I want huge crowds at my Satsangs?" (*Truth Exposed*: 55). She admits that attracting people with religious lectures in order to be garlanded and given millions of rupees in donations, or receive special attention from media is easy.

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[210] Field notes, Chennai (Tamil Nadu), 29.10.1999.

[211] Interview with *svāmī* Mrigananda, Archanapuri Ma's disciple in Kolkata (West Bengal), 11.12.2000.

[212] The book *Astral Experience* is not paginated.

However, she rejects all these activities performed in the name of religion as corruption (*Truth Exposed*: 54–55). Whereas some people I have spoken with mention that Anandmurti Gurumaa has a million followers, a close male disciple I met claimed that the question did not have any relevance at all. "Even if she had only one disciple, it would be enough" he said – an answer totally in line with Anandmurti Gurumaa's view.[213]

## 6. Conclusion

In the present chapter, I have investigated the making of female guruhood through the unfolding process that leads from private religiosity to public recognition, with a special focus upon scriptural, institutional, and charismatic authority. The perception of Hindu women in traditional scriptural sources has always been characterized by strong ambivalence. Being traditionally associated with ritual pollution, women are perceived as either auspicious or inauspicious. In line with most authoritative texts written by male *brāhmaṇas* belonging to the religious elite, and who claim that sacred knowledge should be reserved only for male members of the first three *varṇas*, the present Chapter indicates that most Hindu women's religious roles have little formal, textually sanctioned authority.

According to Brahmanical perceptions, spiritual authority is reflected in the process of spiritual transmission revealed in scriptural sources. This revolves around central concepts such as formal initiation (*dīkṣā*), religious affiliation (*sampradāya*), and transmission of spiritual authority through lineage (*paraṃparā*) embedded in the guru-disciple (*guru-śiṣya*) relationship. These central concepts have been taken up and further emphasized by Western scholarship in the past century.

There is, however, a significant discrepancy between the prescriptions stipulated in authoritative textual sources and women's actual religious practices. My material indicates that most female gurus have never received any formal religious education, and do not claim to have any formal religious affiliation. As religious teachers, they usually have no official positions and give spiritual instructions without being formally qualified. Accordingly, the forms of transmission of

[213] Field notes, Gannaur (Haryana), 20.01.2006. *Truth Exposed*: 54.

spiritual authority among my sample of seventy women appear to be highly flexible, displaying a wide variety of expressions. Hence, most traditional models of spiritual renunciation presented in scriptural sources and scholarly studies may be biased, failing to provide an adequate picture of Indian spirituality including both male and female experience. I will have the opportunity to come back to that issue in Chapter VI.

Whereas previous research claims that male renunciants gain their positions through official, institutionalized recognition, my material indicates that most female gurus derive their spiritual standing through informal channels based on personal experience and charisma. Charisma relates to the gurus' personality reflected in the possession of supernormal powers, and the displaying of trancelike states or their associated *bhāvas*. It also relates to their access to special insights into what is perceived as absolute knowledge, gained through the achievement of enlightenment.

Institutionalized recognition and recognition through charisma are intimately related to issues of authority and power. According to Leacock, whereas authority is "enacted through publicly recognized institutions," thus emphasizing organizational structure, power is understood as "the influence exerted through informal channels," and is associated with spiritual knowledge and human qualities as well as psychological and physical strength (Leacock 1986: 109). The present chapter indicates that the perception of women as highly marginalized in scriptural sources is still reflected in their restricted access to institutional authority giving formal legitimacy to their ministries. However, and in line with Leacock's observations, it also suggests that whereas female gurus do not get authority through institutional channels, they do receive a considerable degree of public recognition and public sanction in their role as charismatic spiritual leaders. Believed to be in possession of exceptional insights, they are perceived as extremely powerful by their followings. These exceptional qualities are further emphasized through the power of *śakti* they are believed to embody.

# VI – Female Guruhood, Celibacy, and Married Life

According to Karen Pechilis, “The guru is an ascetic; she is usually not married, but if she is, then she is not married in the conventional sense, and she will not have children in her status as guru” (Pechilis 2004b: 221–222). Similarly, I undertook this study with the belief that most female gurus were ascetics in terms of not only having renounced their earthly possessions and positions, but also the prospect of marriage and motherhood. However, this belief did not prove to be correct. I found instead that over seventy percent of the female spiritual masters in my study were, or had been married and that most of them had biological children. I eventually realized that my expectations were colored by the ideals of Indian renunciation emphasizing the monastic tradition of *sannyāsa*.

Through Indian history, the stereotypical renunciant is often pictured as a male *sannyāsin*: an orange dressed, emaciated, and homeless male wanderer with a long beard, who withdraws from the world, having given away all his possessions and performed his own mortuary rites, and now devotes his life to performing spiritual austerities, detached from all human ties. *Sannyāsa,* or total renunciation, has been valorized to such an extent that the *sannyāsa* robe is in most cases identified with spiritual advancement. Louis Dumont states that “what one is in the habit of calling Indian Thought is for the very great part the thought of the sanyasi [sic]” (Dumont 1970b: 12). This is echoed by Patrick Olivelle who claims that by the end of the first millennium BCE, the very term *sannyāsa* became “the most common Brahmanical term for renunciation” (Olivelle 1995: 20–21) and Romila Thapar who states that “True renunciation [is] seen as sannyāsa” (Thapar 1988: 286). A consequence of that focus is that *sannyāsa* has frequently been considered superior to other forms of asceticism and thus regarded as normative.

The word *sannyāsin* has various connotations and in the strict meaning of the term, it should primarily be used in two cases. First, it refers to a person belonging to a formal monastic order of *sannyāsins* such as the “Order of Ten Names” (*Daśanāmīs*) believed to have been founded by Śaṅkara, or one of the *vaiṣṇava* sects of Vallabhācarya,

Mādhva, Rāmānanda, or Caitanya. *Sannyāsa* is a dramatic initiatory rite where the adept leaves the world behind in order to be reborn to a new identity.

Second, the term *sannyāsin* refers to a person belonging to the fourth *āśrama*, or stage of life, of the fourfold *varṇāśrama* paradigm. Ideally, in the first *āśrama* of studentship (*brahmacaryāśrama*), the young person, always male, was expected to pursue a life of austerity and chastity while studying at his guru's home, and underwent Vedic initiation, preparing him to assume future responsibilities. In the second stage of life, that of the householder (*gṛhasthāśrama*), the young adult was supposed to marry and beget children while performing his religious duties. These stages were followed by the *vānaprastha*-stage, of the forest hermit, and the *sannyāsin*-stage of renunciation when a man was supposed to reject all social and familial ties (Olivelle 1995: 16–17). Whereas the practice of embracing the fourth *āśrama* is still observed, it is explicitely and exclusivly restricted to men, and hence does not have any female adepts.

*Sannyāsa* is a form of ascetic lifestyle ideally characterized by the giving up of *varṇa* status, homelessness, itinerancy – either naked, or with ochre robes – shaving the head, celibacy, poverty, begging for food, and abandonment of all ritual actions, more particularly the ritual of fire symbolizing householdership (Olivelle 1987: 51–52). It is also considered socially and spiritually irreversible. Because of its highly institutionalized character and its demand for total renunciation, it is the ascetic mode which primarily has excluded women from religious participation.

Given that *sannyāsa* is viewed as renunciation par excellence, it can be opportune to address the following questions: What are the different religious modes displayed by the female gurus I have studied? How do the women experience the relationship between their role as spiritual beings and the role of wife and mother socially expected of them? Which strategies, if any, do they use to reconcile the conflicting demands of the individual and private pursuit of an ascetic-like way of life on the one hand, and the demands of social responsibilities in their role as householders on the other hand? Given that more than seventy percent of the women in the present study are married, can we call all of them "ascetics?"

## 1. "To be in the world but not of it": the position of the Bhagavadgītā

Apart from the word *sannyāsa*, Hindu tradition offers many terms closely related to asceticism as a way of life: *vairāgya*, *tyāga*, and *tapasya*. *Vairāgya*, or dispassion, refers to the inner dimension of asceticism as a state of nonattachment (Teskey Denton 2004: 68–69). According to Lynn Teskey Denton, *tyāga* is conceived as a form of "self-control in the context of formal discipline," including deprivations through yoga practices. In its everyday usage, the term is close to the Western notion of ascetic renunciation (Teskey Denton 2004: 69). *Tapasya*, in turn, refers to the practice of severe religious austerities. It is characterized by "extreme self-mortification" performed in public, and is only practiced by a few people (Teskey Denton 2004: 68–69). As we will see in the present chapter, these terms appear to be particularly valuable as they throw light on the nature and mode of female gurus' religious involvement.

Broadly speaking, dispassion and detachment are what characterize "mental renunciation," one of the main messages of the Bhagavadgītā. According to that text, salvation can be achieved through the practice of *karmayoga* (yoga of action). This entails that inner freedom can not be achieved by choosing between action and non-action, but instead by renuncing the fruits of action (*tyāga*) (II.47; XVIII.2). The author of the Bhagavadgītā claims that what binds a person is not the action itself but the motifs and expectations linked to that action. Hence, renunciation entailing total detachment of the mind is not considered as primarily an outer state of being but as a mental attitude.

According to the Bhagavadgītā, a person may have social commitments and responsibilities yet still be detached and not bound by them. Such a person is also called *niṣkāmakarmayogī* or "one who performs one's duties without any thought of consequences to oneself" (Ghurye 1953: 3). That view entails that one does not have to renounce the world in order to realize God, given that the only thing that has to be renounced is the *ego* (*ahaṃkāra*), or the mind, by cultivating "dispassion" (*vairāgya*). This inner attitude is commonly reflected in expressions such as "being in the world but not of it" or "renunciation in action, rather than renunciation of action" (Kaelber 1987: 442).

Translated into the example of the householder (*gṛhastha*), this means that with the "right" understanding, embracing the *gṛhastha* stage need not be an obstacle to salvation. This is illustrated in the teachings of Amritanandamayi as follows:

> It is possible to carry on a spiritual life while living in the world. The only thing is that one must perform actions selflessly without any attachment. One should not worry about the past or the future. Live in the present, surrendering your actions and their fruit at the Feet of the Lord. Perform your duties as sincerely as possible, keeping in mind that all is entrusted by God. Be satisfied with whatever is provided by the Supreme. (*Awaken Children!* 1990, vol. II: 101)

According to that view, married life is considered an arena for self-mastery through the pursuit of *dharma* (virtue) in order to awaken one's spiritual nature, and an opportunity to achieve spiritual perfection. Accordingly, worldly activities should be performed while focusing upon the divine and/or as an offering to the divine (Bhagavadgītā IX.27). Expressing a widespread Indian view, Madan claims that "the longing for divine love and grace does not require one to abandon one's family and become a renouncer. It so transforms and enlarges one's affections as to make them all partake of divine love. The love of God is not exclusive and does not require withdrawal" (Madan 1988: 39). This discipline of action is not only regarded as a desirable attitude toward life but as superior to the renunciation of worldly life (Bhagavadgītā V.2).

The notion of discipline of action involved in the practice of *karmayoga* has given rise to the notion of selfless service to humanity, or *seva*, prevalent today in various *āśrams*, which states that all actions should be performed with an attitude of inner detachment. This notion defines service in the world on behalf of other people as central to the renunciatory ideal. The practice of *karmayoga* shows similarities with the Protestant ethic of "this-worldly asceticism" which has been investigated extensively by Max Weber, where notions of "calling"

(*Beruf*), and "life-task" are central (Weber 1958: 79).[214] In his study of Protestantism, Weber claims that one of Luther's main contributions was the justification of worldly activity, as "a direct manifestation of divine will" (Weber 1958: 85).

From having first embraced the idea of world rejection, Protestantism eventually developed the conception of world affirmation, in which the fulfillment of duty in worldly affairs is valued "as the highest form which the moral activity of the individual could assume" (Weber 1958: 79–81; 80). Whereas renunciation of worldly activities came to be considered a "product of selfishness, withdrawing from temporal obligations," worldly involvement was regarded "as the outward expression of brotherly love" (Weber 1958: 81). As Weber put it, "The only way of living acceptably to God was not to surpass worldly morality in monastic asceticism, but solely through the fulfilment of the obligations imposed upon the individual by his position in the world" (Weber 1958: 80).

Another central belief expressed in the Bhagavadgītā and which is part of *bhakti* theology, is the doctrine of total surrender to the divine (*prapatti*) and the supremacy of divine grace for human salvation, salvation being believed to be bestowed upon the individual as an act of divine grace. A consequence of that belief is that householders as well as celibate ascetics have equal access to *mukti* (salvation) (Olivelle 1995: 26).

## 2. *Tantra* and married life

Besides the message of *bhakti*, another current of thought whose exponents do not consider married life an obstacle to the achievement of spiritual perfection is *tantra*, including *śaiva*, *śākta*, and *vaiṣṇava* strands. Little is known about the origins of *tantra* but according to Goudriaan, there is no doubt that it was influenced by "unsystematized yoga and body cult, shamanism, medicine, magic white and black, astrology, religious eroticism, and folkloristic ritual" (Goudriaan 1979: 17). According to Gavin Flood, Tantric practitioners (*tāntrikas*) may have originated among ascetics living on cremation

[214] Many scholars argue that the notion of *seva*, though present in traditional Hinduism, was developed to a larger extent, and read into the texts such as the Bhagavadgītā, as a result of colonial (Protestant) influence and its criticism of the Hindu ideal of world-renunciation.

grounds, probably with "low-caste" background. By the early medieval period, ecstatic ascetics started imitating Bhairava and Kālī, indulging in meat, alcohol, and sexual rituals. Eventually, the ideologies of these groups started influencing Brahmanical circles, as was the case in eleventh century Kashmir. The well-known *śaiva* theologian Abhinavagupta started transforming this extreme form of Tantric ideology into a more respectable "high-caste" religion. Due to the Muslim invasions in the twelfth century CE, *tantra* declined rapidly in northern and central India, but survived in South India (Flood 1996: 161).

*Tantra* is essentially rooted in householder traditions and is by and large anti-ascetic in viewpoint. According to Tantric theology, the purpose of spiritual practices is not to be understood as withdrawal and transcendence of the world of forms, but instead as immersion in it, in an attempt to integrate the totality of human experience, the material and the spiritual. In most religious traditions, spiritual seekers are concerned with purifying themselves from desires and passions, trying to reduce the impact of these things on their everyday lives. In Brahmanical ideology, the body is understood as ritually pure but constantly threatened by impurity through the discharge of bodily fluids such as excrement, sexual fluids, and menstrual discharge (Olivelle 1995: 20).

In contrast, *tantra* transgresses purity restrictions and can be described as a practice to heighten awareness of the world through the senses. Tantric practitioners (*tāntrikas*) do not discriminate between "pure" and "impure," and menstrual blood is especially honored as it is considered the quintessence of femininity, giving a surplus of power. As Bharati puts it, "The tantras do not teach to subdue the senses, but to increase their power and then to harness them in the service of the achievement of lasting enstasy" (Bharati 1965: 290). Tantric practices aim to break through mental constructs. *Tāntrikas* cultivate the belief that the absolute is in the body, understood as the temple of God, and believe that in going back to its source, they are able to rediscover the absolute within themselves. According to the terminology of one of the northern Tantric schools of India, this spontaneous recognition is called *pratyabhijña*, "recognition." This recognition leads to what is called the *sahaja* state, a "natural" inner state of oneness and spontaneity unfettered by self-limitation or delusion.

What unites *tantra*, *śākta*, and *bhakti* traditions is a belief that humans do not need to be *sannyāsins* in order to evolve spiritually. While the impact of *bhakti* contributed to the emergence of medieval female poetry, elevating some women to the status of poet-saints, *tantra* and śāktism came to emphasize the feminine as divine principle. *Bhakti* and *tantra* theologies still have a significant impact on contemporary female guruhood, encouraging women to participate actively in religious life in ways that suit them.

## 3. Guruhood and householdership

Contrary to Christian ascetic traditions, where married life is not considered compatible with full-time dedication to God, my material indicates that householdership is common and widely chosen by Indian female gurus. As mentioned above, a great majority of the female spiritual masters in the present study are, or have been married. Of those in my sample whose marital status can be identified (57), twenty nine are married, seven are widowed, and six are either divorced, separated, and/or remarried, while only fifteen are celibate. In other words, forty two out of fifty seven Indian female gurus in my sample (73.7 %) are, or have been married.

Textual sources forbidding female asceticism are few in number and are found only in some passages of the *dharmaśāstras* or Law Books, focusing upon *sannyāsa* as the fourth stage of life. Whereas total renunciation was neither prohibited nor particularly encouraged, the general attitude was that it was "inappropriate" for women (Teskey Denton 2004: 23). In Indian tradition, marriage and motherhood are highly valorized and a woman is discouraged from being an ascetic as this would conflict with her *strīdharma* (woman's duty) (Basham 1992: 180). Meena Khandelwal states rightly that "because of its emphasis on celibacy, vedic learning, solitude, and itinerancy, sannyasa is the form of Indian asceticism least hospitable to women" (Khandelwal 2004: 5). That is in line with Katherine Young who states that women rarely renounced their family ties in order to achieve liberation, with the exception of those belonging to certain Tantric traditions (Young 1987: 68). Instead, emphasis is placed on inner asceticism as a spiritual model practiced within the framework of householdership.

The predominance of married women among the female gurus studied should be understood in light of the *varṇāśramadharma* scheme presented above. One characteristic of this paradigm is the idealization of the *gṛhastha*-stage of life (householdership), emphasizing married life. In his study of the *dharmaśāstras*, Kane points out that the overall tendency in the texts "is to glorify the status of a house-holder and push into the background the two *āśramas* of *vānaprastha* and *saṁnyāsa*" (Kane 1974: 424). Manusmṛti, for example, accords the greatest importance to *gṛhasthāśrama*, stating that "Because it is householders who sustain people in all three orders of life every day by giving them knowledge and food, the householder represents the most senior order of life" (III.78).

Householdership has been embraced by people from diverse Indian religious orientations for centuries. Whereas Indira Betiji *gosvāmi* (1939–) from Vadodara (Gujarat) ironically has chosen celibacy, the religious path of the *puṣṭimārga* from the Vallabhācārya sect to which she still belongs remains almost entirely a householder movement. Householdership still has a significant impact on contemporary female guruhood, and in the following, we will see that women's perceptions of *sannyāsa* and *gṛhastha* still appear to be highly influenced by the message of the Bhagavadgītā.

Three of the women presented in Chapter II are married. According to *svāmī* Sidheshwarananda, Madhobi Ma was forced to marry at a young age, mainly for social reasons. When Madhobi Ma met her guru for the first time, she was still a teenage girl. Her guru lived naked on a cremation ground and was in a permanent trancelike state. Madhobi Ma's spiritual longing was so strong that she wanted to be in his company daily, and she took every opportunity to run away to him. Given her young age and her royal origins, the situation became untenable for her surroundings. As a result, her parents chose a husband for her and had her married in order to tie her to a "decent" life.[215] Worth mentioning is that although Madhobi Ma is not formally initiated, she wears the saffron clothes of a *sannyāsinī*.

Another woman portrayed in Chapter II who chose married life is Sai Rajarajeshwari. When she was in her twenties, her guru asked her to marry (*SSRS* 1999: 202–204). Although she was not fond of the sug-

[215] Interview with Madhobi Ma in Delhi, 29.10.2001.

gestion at first, she consented to do so, wishing to fulfill her *dharma*, or religious duty. Commenting on her decision, the compilers of Sai Rajarajeshwari's hagiography make the following statement:

> Being in the world as the wife of an individual, one has to discharge and fulfill the duties that fall in one's lot. If one does not do what one must as a housewife, it amounts to neglect of one's familial obligation. It will be a blight on family dharma or the housewife dharma. (*SSRS* 1999: 214)

This opinion is largely consonant with the message of the Bhagavadgītā:

> Better one's own duty, (tho) imperfect,
> Than another's duty well performed;
> Better death in (doing) one's own duty;
> Another's duty brings danger (III.35)

In *SSRS*, Sai Rajarajeshwari makes the following comment:

> No ashrama is superior or inferior to the other. However, since the grahastha [sic] ashrama is the foundation of society and all other ashramas depend upon it for sustenance, I am leading the life of a housewife in order to highlight the importance and greatness of this stage of life and to show that even in this stage, spiritualism can be given attention. It is to make this clear that I am Myself living as a housewife and setting an example to you. (*SSRS* 1999: 27)

This is echoed by Amritanandamayi. When one of her followers once asked her if *sannyāsa* is superior to *gṛhastha*, she answered:

> Each is great in its own way. A householder who leads a life of sacrifice, abandoning all selfish desires and performing all his actions dedicated to God, is undoubtedly great. A monk who gives up all sensual pleasures and

> leads a life of self-surrender and renunciation is also great. (*Awaken Children!* 1990, vol. II: 198)[216]

What Sai Rajarajeshwari and Amritanandamayi suggest is that worldly life and spirituality can coexist side by side. Sai Rajarajeshwari also refers to the *varṇāśramadharma* where interdependence of *varṇa* and stage of life, each associated with its respective *dharma*, is believed to be necessary for the maintenance of the balance of society, and where the householder is believed to provide material sustenance to the *sannyāsin*. Sai Rajarajeshwari views the combining of her role as spiritual teacher and the *gṛhastha dharma* as a divine *līlā* (play) performed according to her own wishes. She claims that the purpose of that play, fitting perfectly the needs of the age, is to serve as a model for mankind (*SSRS* 1999: 11).

Jnanananda Sarasvathi (1929–) is another woman who has chosen to live as a *gṛhastha*. As previously noted, she was guided by "the Divine" from a young age and chose to live a disciplined life at home. She is said to have followed rigorous spiritual practices for years such as controlling her senses, being unaffected by the past and the future, and eating only one meal a day, while serving the Divine through her daily activities of caring for her husband and five children (*The Divine Descent* 1976: 11–12). According to the author of *The Divine Descent*,

> Mother was an ideal householder. She was a devoted wife and loving mother whose affection for the children was absolutely selfless. She was guided by the ideal that a householder was a Sannyasin outside the house and was not attracted at all by the glamour of the world. […] Mother was now serving the Divine as a perfect Karmayogi, doing work in total dedication to the Divine without the ego-drive. (*The Divine Descent* 1976: 11)

Jnanananda Sarasvathi's husband died some years ago, and nowadays she is a living example of how to live a contemplative life in the world. For extensive periods of time, she has lived in total seclusion in her house in Chennai. For years, she seldom went out of her home

[216] cf. Max Weber: "the fulfilment of worldly duties is under all circumstances the only way to live acceptably to God. It and it alone is the will of God, and hence every legitimate calling has exactly the same worth in the sight of God" (Weber 1958: 81).

(*The Divine Descent* 1976: 18). Between 1994 and 1998, she undertook another period of total seclusion. She never left her home and did not give any *darśans*, spending most of her time in meditation.[217]

In both Sai Rajarajeshwari's and Jnanananda Sarasvathi's accounts, we can clearly see that like most of the women in the present study, they cultivate an inner attitude of detachment as depicted in the Bhagavadgītā, practicing *karmayoga*. While internally they cut all the bonds of the life as householders, externally they do not dissociate themselves from their husbands and children, thus embodying the ideal of renunciation perceived as a mental attitude. As Teskey Denton puts it, while socially interacting with other human beings, "they ignore the ritual values inherent in these relations" (Teskey Denton 2004: 61).

Interestingly, this ideal of renunciation involving a balance between spiritual and social demands is contradicted in other parts of Jnanananda Sarasvathi's life-story. We are told that when she was thirty-one years old, and only a year before the birth of her fourth child, Jnanananda Sarasvathi intensified her *sādhana*. She denied herself all comforts, took very little food and sleep, and spent many hours in daily meditation. As a result, she was no longer able to follow her *strīdharma* like before. While her husband and children supported her, friends and relatives could not understand the turn that her life had taken.

> From 1960 onwards, the Divine trained Mother in developing great detachment. She cut off her connections with the circle of her relatives and friends and would not communicate with them through letters or by visit. Even her children studying at Yercaud would not receive any letters from her. She was also not observing the normal courtesies to her kith and kin such as sending condolences on bereavements or greetings on happy occasions. She had practically isolated and insulated herself from the influence of the external world. She would seldom move out of the house. Often, even the movements inside the house would be restricted to certain rooms. This could not be understood by her relatives and friends who began to consider her as queer. They ostracised and harassed her.

[217] Field notes, (Tamil Nadu), 29.10.1999.

> Some of them even considered her mad. When Mother asked her Divine guide why she was so much misunderstood and persecuted by others, It replied: "Show me or name one of my saints who was not persecuted by the world". […]. However, even those difficulties turned out to her advantage as the relatives and friends left her alone without interfering in her life, thus providing her with that solitude and seclusion so much needed for her spiritual sadhana. (*The Divine Descent* 1976: 18)

According to *The Divine Descent*, Jnanananda Sarasvathi's entire life of the family was in the hands of the Divine during that period of time and the children followed "his" command. The children's education was arranged by "him" and was sometimes interrupted. Jnanananda Sarasvathi received much criticism from her relatives, but even if her family could not accept her sudden change of role from wife, mother, relative, and friend to spiritual master, she at least received recognition from her followers (*The Divine Descent* 1976: 22–23).

## 4. *Strīdharma*, *pativratādharma*, and the concept of *śakti*

Though the present study indicates that most of the female gurus have opted for married life, they all claim to be spiritual renunciants. My material indicates that dispassion and equanimity (*vairāgya*) as well as restraint and self-control (*tyāga*) permeate their daily lives. Their deep commitment to an ascetic-like lifestyle is also acknowledged by most of their followers. Most female gurus hardly have any time for themselves, as they work ceaselessly. They get little sleep, eat little, and/or keep a vegetarian diet. They follow a strict and busy daily routine divided between worship, meditation, and the spiritual guidance of their followers. Their ascetic-like lifestyle is also reflected in the goal of their self-imposed austerities, which is spiritual salvation.

The ascetic lifestyle is closely related to the concept of *śakti* understood as female "energy," "power" or "force." It is also related to the notion of *tapas* ("heat") which a person is believed to accumulate internally through self-denial. According to that belief, the longer and harsher the self-denial, the greater the heat that is accumulated. This

internal heat is said to yield inner strength and power, or *śakti*, which is considered inherently female. *Śakti* can be accumulated through spiritual renunciation, for example by practicing patience, endurance, or chastity, or doing service to others. Interestingly, it can also be gained by coping with painful social conditions such as belonging to the downtrodden, being uneducated, or choosing a faithful life with a cruel husband (Egnor 1980: 14). In a comment on five Tamil women who had to endure painful social conditions, Margaret Egnor argues that "For each woman, the possession of extraordinary *śakti* came as a consequence of the suffering that subordination entailed" (Egnor 1980: 14). In other words, there is a widespread belief that women are able to increase their *śakti* through being exemplary *pativrātas* within the framework of the *strīdharma* paradigm.

According to Leslie, "the only religious path open to women is that of the good wife" (Leslie 1992: 12). A woman is supposed to follow her *strīdharma*, literally "woman's duty" and more specifically her *pativratādharma*, a term which has been widely explored in scholarship during the past three decades. *Pativratādharma* is related to the duty of a virtuous wife devoted to her husband. The notions of *strīdharma* and *pativratādharma* are set forth in Manusmṛti, a text belonging to the *dharmaśāstras* or *Law Books*, ("treatises on right behavior"), and give an ideal picture of a perfect woman embodying qualities such as patience, control, and chastity (V.158), purity, faithfulness, loyalty, and devotion. The text explicitly states that "a good woman should always worship her husband like a god" (V.154).[218]

Whereas there is historical evidence that in Vedic times, the young boy had automatic access to ritual activity by studying with and serving a teacher, it is also said that a woman could only associate herself with the domestic fire through subordinating herself to her husband (Smith 1998: 155). According to Manusmṛti, while *brāhmaṇa* boys were supposed to receive the rite of passage of the *upanayana* in childhood, for women, the wedding ceremony came to be considered a Vedic sacrament equivalent to male *upanayana* initiation (Manusmṛti II. 36; 67). Moreover, serving the husband was said to be the equivalent of

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[218] See also I. Julia Leslie, *The Perfect Wife*, presenting *Strīdharmapaddhati* or *Guide to the Religious Status and Duties of Women*, written in the eighteenth century by the orthodox *paṇḍit* Tryambaka. This Sanskrit treatise modeled on *Manusmṛti* gives an insight into the daily routines, and more particularly, of the life of high-caste women at the court in Thanjavur (South India).

serving the teacher, and daily household duties the equivalent of worshiping the sacred fire, thus making a woman a social, dharmic role model (Manusmṛti II. 67).

In other words, the *strīdharma* ideal appears to be a model of life and a model of sanctity where marriage is considered a spiritual discipline or a *sādhana*. It is through marriage, begetting and nurturing children, worshiping one's husband, and attending to all his needs that a woman is supposed to show devotion and service to God (Young 1987: 72–74). The *strīdharma* model can thus be viewed as the counterpart of the fourth *āśrama* of the *varṇāśramadharma* scheme where a man is allowed to renounce all kinds of worldly ties. A consequence of that scheme is that whereas a man can be liberated through renouncing the world, for a woman, it is within and through marriage that she can attain salvation (Clémentin-Ojha 1988: 35).

The *strīdharma* and *pativratādharma* ideals still permeate Indian religious life, and while researching the present study, I have found a few examples of women who are explicitly said to have followed such *pativratādharma* model during their lifetimes. One woman who, according to her devotees, chose to follow such a model, at least to some extent, is Anasuya Devi (1923–1985) from Jillellamudi in Andhra Pradesh. According to her American disciple Richard Schiffman, Anasuya Devi did encourage women to treat their marriage as a *sādhana*, as expressed in the following quotation:

> Mother has said that the wife who treats her marriage as a *sadhana*, a spiritual discipline, is fortunate indeed. This path of serving, obeying and revering one's partner is one that Amma has scrupulously followed throughout her married life. In her case, however, it was not as a *sadhana* that she adopted this role, but in order to set a living example for others. Mother says that what the yogi strives for by leaving home and repairing to some lonely spot, the devoted wife can realize easily by maintaining a worshipful and pure attitude towards her husband. Marriage is only a hindrance to spiritual progress when it is perceived crudely as an exclusively physical or emotional union. By opening oneself to the spiritual dimension of marriage, Amma insists, it is possible to transform married life into a royal road to perfection. (Schiffman 2001: 171)

According to Schiffman, Anasuya Devi followed her duty exemplarily: she worshiped her *maṅgalsūtra* and her husband's feet daily as an Indian woman is supposed to do. She obeyed her husband in all matters, asking his permission whenever she wanted to leave the village. We are told that when a disciple wanted to worship her for the first time, she asked for the permission of her husband, and when her husband agreed, she paid reverence at his feet. During the yearly celebration of her marriage anniversary, she used to worship her husband's feet in a public ceremony. In other words, she followed the *pativratādharma* model carefully. Following the gender stereotype of her time, Schiffman claims, she fully accepted an inferior and subservient status in regard to her husband (Schiffman 2001: 225–226). As the quotation above explicitly exemplifies, all these rituals were not performed for her own sake but "in order to set a living example for others," a recurring comment among the female gurus of today (Schiffman 2001: 171).

The *pativratādharma* model was also followed by Anandamayi Ma (1986–1982), another female guru belonging to Anasuya Devi's generation. According to one of Anandamayi Ma's disciple, Bithika Mukerji, Anandamayi Ma's husband "received from her the untiring and selfless service of a devoted and dutiful wife" (Lassell Hallstrom 1999: 62). Like Anasuya Devi, she did not take any initiatives without her husband's permission. Lisa Lassell Hallstrom questions, however, Anandamayi Ma's role as perfect wife, believing it to be a myth as she finds many examples in Mukerji's accounts that speak against Anandamayi Ma's unquestioning obedience to her husband (Lassell Hallstrom 1999: 62).

Although my material indicates that a few women did follow the *pativratādharma* ideal of obedient service to the husband a couple of decades ago, and that it still is mentioned in a few hagiographies, it is generally not followed, or even idealized, at least openly, by today's gurus. That ideology seems to belong to a remote Brahmanical ideal further idealized by nostalgic hagiographers. What all contemporary gurus, female as well as male emphasize, however, is that true renunciation does not take place at a physical level, but at a mental one.

## 5. Sexual abstinence within marriage

Chastity is considered a positive and compelling Hindu ideal. It is not advocated for all people, and sexual abstinence among married Indian couples is not common. According to common Indian views, marriage is not regarded as a relationship between two people but involves the entire extended family of the husband's and the wife's relatives. Whereas sexual abstinence within marriage is not common, moral as well as sexual restraint is the key word in Indian marriage relationships, and is accorded particular reverence. This is, for example, reflected in the practice of newly married couples to not consummate the marriage during the first three days after the wedding. The reason why sexual abstinence is highly idealized is because it is considered necessary in the pursuit of spiritual salvation.

According to Teskey Denton, "Because asceticism as a value is so integral to Hindu life and thought, one meets many people who, while remaining householders, adopt ascetic practices and lead ascetic-like lives" (Teskey Denton 2004: 105).[219] Madhu Kishwar claims that voluntary sexual abstinence is commonly practiced by married Indian people during certain parts of life (Kishwar 2003: 22). My material indicates that a few women in the present study have put that ascetic lifestyle ideal into practice within the bounds of marriage.[220]

The most famous model for this practice in modern times is the relationship between Ramakrishna and Sharada Devi (1853–1920). When Sharada Devi was only six years old, she married Ramakrishna, thus following the orthodox Hindu social code of the times. According to Indian tradition, marriages used to take place at a very young age for the bride but were consummated later on, in the early teens. However it is said that this couple lived throughout their marriage in a "spiritual relationship," without any sexual contact. This sexless relationship was started on the initiative of Ramakrishna. In 1872, nineteen-year-old Sharada Devi spent a little more than one year with her husband. *Svāmī* Nirvedananda, one of Ramakrishna's disciples recounts that period as follows:

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219 cf. Christianity: "Medieval people believed that a chaste marriage was possible and that it was a sign not of sickness but of sanctity, a self-administrated spiritual test of the most severe and relentless sort" (Weinstein and Bell 1982: 76).

220 cf. Christianity. The relationship between Mary and Joseph was said to be without sexual involvement.

> And for nearly eight months of this period, she shared the bed of her saintly consort. […] From a close quarter, on the same bed, she would observe how Shrī Rāmakṛiṣhṇa scarcely aware of his physical surroundings, would remain absorbed in divine communion. […] At the end of this eight months' spiritual training, she had no other desire but to get a firm and unshakable stand on the beatific plane, while devoting herself to the service of her heavenly guide. […] The husband, a confirmed monk, became the Master, while the wife came to be a disciple and, practically, a nun vowed to lifelong celibacy. (Swami Nirvedananda 1997: 483 – 484)

This account suggests that although she became Ramakrishna's first and foremost disciple, Sharada Devi also chose to conform to the *pativratā* role expected of her. In that idealized relationship, Ramakrishna and Sharada Devi regarded themselves as a spiritual couple, or brother and sister, as a means to serve a higher noble cause. This is reflected in Madhu Kishwar's following comment:

> It is a partnership between two persons of the opposite sex where the physical is wholly absent… It is possible only between two *brahmacaris* in thought, word and deed… It is a meeting between two kindred spirits. (Kishwar 1986: 36).[221]

Another well-known person who later in life adopted the vow of sexual abstinence, and advocated an ascetic lifestyle is Mahatma Gandhi. He made the decision during a stay in South Africa and observed it until the end of his life. In his youth, Gandhi long suffered from what he called "juvenile excess" (Kishwar 1986: 40). He could never forgive himself for having indulged in sexual intimacy with his pregnant wife when his father was lying on his deathbed. The birth of a dead child some time later only confirmed to him the "latent mischief in the sexual nature of man" (Kishwar 1986: 40). Gandhi believed that true love between a man and woman could only flower when the two persons involved voluntarily renounced all sexual con-

[221] Such a view is however questioned by Jeffrey J. Kripal (1995) who argues that Ramakrishna's lack of interest in the opposite sex had to do with his homosexual tendencies.

tact. He claimed that he and his wife finally tasted "the real bliss of married life" when they gave up sexuality (Kishwar 1986: 42).

One reason for Gandhi's choice of sexual abstinence was the idea that the loss of semen could damage the physical and spiritual energy of men – a widely accepted view in Hindu thought (Kishwar 1986: 46). Gandhi believed that sexual lust instead had to be transcended and transformed for the sake of higher social and political goals. Blessing young people upon their marriage, he replaced the usual Indian greeting "May you be the mother of hundred sons!" with "May you have no children!" (Kishwar 1986: 42). Like Ramakrishna, Gandhi experimented with sexual abstinence. His final experiment took place with his cousin's nineteen-year-old grand-daughter Manu. It is said that they slept naked together, holding each other, without succumbing to sexual temptation (Kishwar 1986: 46).[222]

The pattern of never consuming marriage has, as far as I am aware, only been followed by one of the contemporary female gurus explored in this study. Anandamayi Ma (Nirmala) opted for a sexless relationship with her husband Bholanath, but the initiative was solely her own. Speaking of Anandamayi Ma's husband, Lisa Lassell Hallstrom recounts the following incident:

> When he first tried to approach Her physically, he supposedly received such a violent electric shock that he put for a time being all thought of a physical relationship out of his mind. He seems to have initially thought that this was only a temporary condition. That Nirmala was still such a child and that She would later become "normal". But the marriage was never physically consummated. (Lassell Hallstrom 1999: 35)

Apart from her aversion to sexual contact, Nirmala is said to have fulfilled her role as a Hindu wife perfectly, cooking, cleaning the house, receiving guests, and obeying her husband in all matters. In 1922, when she was twenty six years old, her *sādhana* intensified to such an extent that she was not able to attend to household work and

[222] See also Pat Caplan, "Celibacy as a solution? Mahatma Gandhi and *Brahmacharya*," 1989. Along with Gandhi's revival of the institution of *brahmacarya*, celibacy was, among other things, advocated as a means to increase spiritual power and to change the relationship between males and females.

care for her husband anymore, as she was in a constant state of *samādhi* (Lassell Hallstrom 1999: 71). After 1926, Anandamayi Ma's bodily indifference increased further and she stopped feeding herself. From that day onwards until her death, she was fed by others, among others by her husband Bholanath, who later on became her disciple (Lassell Hallstrom 1999: 73). Apart from Anandamayi Ma, I have not found examples of unconsummated marriage among the gurus of today, suggesting that the practice might be part of an old ideal belonging to a past generation.

## 6. Rejecting Marriage

In Indian culture, marriage is considered a fundamental economic institution and the central bond of a family, and a woman is expected to get married and raise children. From the perspective of the *dharmaśāstras*, renunciation of marriage and family ties for a life of celibacy, asceticism, and spiritual discipline is one of the most provocative options that can be chosen by a woman. As Catherine Ojha puts it, "The male ascetic is a man who has made a choice between ideals in life equally allowed for him. But the female ascetic is a woman who having renounced the single mode of life set for her adopts a behavior primarily intended for males" (Ojha 1981: 256). In other words, while a male can choose between asceticism and married life, marriage is the most usual option open to women.

Given the centrality of the home in a family-oriented culture, the woman who opts for solitude, independence, and full-time spiritual pursuits has been labeled by some scholars as "anomalous" (Leslie 1989: 139; Khandelwal 2004: 5), "outside the norms" (Clémentin-Ojha 1988), and even an aberration (Joy 1993: 28). The first reason why female celibacy might be perceived as threatening to Indian people has to be understood from an economic perspective: as they get older, parents are dependent on sons and sons-in-law for their maintenance, and a celibate daughter fails to provide such support. Another reason is that given the fact that female celibacy suggests that a woman can make own decisions about her sexuality, such a choice questions the widespread patriarchal notion of female vulnerability in need of male control, thus posing a serious threat to family honor.

For some women, however, a life of total renunciation is viewed as intrisic to the quest for liberation. The process can be viewed as the successive renunciation of the assumptions, concepts, attitudes, and evaluations that characterize the human condition. In attaining liberation, one is supposed to disentangle oneself from the emotional, intellectual, and social habits of mind that perpetuate one's continuing existence in the cycle of *saṃsāra*. The first step in this process is the physical act of renunciation in order to transform one's life-style and behavior, given that external transformation is believed to be a prerequisite to internal renunciation.

In that part of my sample where the gurus' marital status could be discerned (57), fifteen women or 26.3% have rejected marriage, sexuality, and procreation as they found their spiritual aspirations to be irreconcilable with worldly ties. The decision to remain unmarried was sometimes taken at a tender age, and was, in a few cases, a natural consequence of the whole family's extensive spiritual involvement. Malti (1955–) from Mumbai, later known as Gurumayi, is one of these. Malti's parents were followers of Muktananda and spirituality was at the center of family life. When she was five years old, Malti visited Muktananda's *āśram* in Ganeshpuri for the first time, together with her parents, brothers, and sister. From this time onward, the family visited the *āśram* every week-end (Durgananda 1997: 62).

Already from a young age, Malti participated in full-time *āśram* activities that trained her for a life of celibacy, and when she was fourteen years old, she received formal *śaktipāt*-initiation from her guru (Durgananda 1997: 64). She moved to the *āśram* where she undertook a traditional *gurukula* life. She was set apart from the others, was assigned her own tutor, received rigorous spiritual training, and was eventually chosen to be the translator of Muktananda's public talks, translating Hindi teachings for English-speaking devotees (Durgananda 1997: 99). In April, 1982, when she was twenty-six years old, Malti received initiation into *sannyāsa* and was given the name *svāmī* Chidvilasananda (Durgananda 1997: 115). Six months later, she was installed, together with her brother Nityananda, as Muktananda's successor after his death (Durgananda 1997: 126).

My material indicates that quite frequently, the decision to remain celibate was already taken during adolescence, at an age when, according to Indian conventions, parents try to find a suitable prospec-

tive husband for their daughter in preparation for a future arranged marriage. Anandmurti Gurumaa, presented in Chapter II, deliberately rejected marriage and took the vow of celibacy. She claims, however, that this decision was never a matter of principle for her. Therefore, she never imposes celibacy on her followers as she believes that imposed celibacy can never be authentic. Referring to the practice of castration among Christian monks as a means to cure sexual desire, she claims that this strategy is doomed to fail given that sexual desire is not located in the monk's genitals but in his mind. Furthermore, she believes that if God could be realized just by living in celibacy, everybody would have already done so. Speaking from her own spiritual experience, she merely states that when the mind has tasted the pure joy and bliss of deep meditation, sexual pleasure becomes comparatively tasteless. Then, the urge to "enslave" oneself to a partner falls away and celibacy just happens very naturally (*The Awakening* 2000: 91–93).

Several scholarly studies claim that the poetry of female Indian saints in medieval devotional movements reflects an inability to reconcile social duty with devotion to God. One frequently recurring theme, partly following the ideals of sainthood of the times, is that of saints portrayed as outsiders; failing to be recognized by family members, and therefore unjustly persecuted, they are finally saved by divine intervention.[223] Medieval devotion was inevitably associated with a rupture with the social world where most women rejected worldly power in favor of extreme austerity.

Although times have changed, Meena Khandelwal claims that the *sannyāsinīs* she met in Haridvar still had to confront many obstacles and faced the disapproval of their families because of their being female. Refusing to follow societal norms is described as embarrassing, bringing shame to family and relatives. Another obstacle is the deprecatory attitude from conservative male renunciants. However, the main obstacle facing *sannyāsinīs* was, according to Meena Khandelwal, the "general vulnerability to violence and sexual exploitation," not only from strangers but also male gurus (Khandelwal 2004: 182).

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[223] See for example A. K. Ramanujan 1995; Mary MacGee 1999; Nancy Martin-Kershaw 1999; Steven J. Rosen, 1999.

According to my own observations, however, there are very few records of struggles against parental pressures, social obligations, or abuse in the testimonies about the female gurus' lives I have examined. Whereas my material indicates that the decision to remain celibate is not usually totally welcomed by parents and relatives at the beginning, after a time, it usually is accepted without any major tensions. Archanapuri Ma (1928–) from Kolkata acknowledges that she was pressured by her parents to marry. She claims that she "renounced the world" at the age of fourteen and became a *sannyāsinī* at the age of sixteen.[224] Despite the fact that her parents were the disciples of Thakur Satyananda, and had taken the vows of *sannyāsin* and *sannyāsinī*, there was some turmoil in the family when she declared that she did not intend to marry. They thought their young daughter was not mature enough to understand the meaning of marriage and of spiritual life. Ultimately, however, Archanapuri Ma received permission to take the vow of renunciation.[225]

Karunamayi (1958–) from Bangalore, Indira Betiji (1939–) from Vadodara, Mate Mahadevi (1946–) from Bangalore, Krishna Ma (1939–1999) from Mathura, and Anandmurti Gurumaa from Gannaur have all rejected marriage. They were all expected to marry, but I have not been able to find any records of permanent family conflicts resulting from their decision. On the contrary, what is striking in all the accounts is the women's strong determination and resolution to remain celibate, no matter the consequences, and the acceptance of their choice by family members.

Anandmurti Gurumaa, portrayed in Chapter II acknowledges that already from her early teens, she was seldom at home, but roamed about to different holy places in order to mingle with like-minded people. She was very curious to know if holy people had realized what they taught to disciples, i.e., enlightenment. At first, her family and relatives had difficulty accepting her choice of an ascetic way of life. She recounts that her parents were disturbed by the crowds of women, children, and old people standing regularly outside their house and waiting to come inside in order to have the so-called *darśans* and get answers to their questions. As she puts it,

[224] Interview with swami Mrigananda in Kolkata (West Bengal), 11.12.2000.
[225] Interview with swami Mrigananda in Kolkata (West Bengal), 11.12.2000.

> For the family it was hard, but not that much hard that they would get offensive. They were not offensive, they were not defensive, they were pretty neutral. So I got my space. I had my space. I always had my space because I know that we have to create our own space, so I was creating my space, always. But it was hard for them.[226]

Although the family members found the situation difficult for some years, they eventually reconciled themselves with her lifestyle.[227] Anandmurti Gurumaa claims to have never found her double role and combined responsibilities as woman and guru to be especially challenging. When I asked if she has met resistance from society, she replied in the direct and self-confident way which is so typical of her:

> As long as I know who I am, there is not any room left for resistance. And those who are seeking the truth, they have to be that much wise to understand that a guru is above the body. So this so-called "sexism" does not apply to a seeker and I am for the seeker, not for the world. So it doesn't matter. For a seeker, it doesn't matter, for me, it doesn't matter. And for those for whom it matters, they don't matter for me. That's it![228]

As far as I understand, several influential psychosocial factors should be taken into account when considering the lack of permanent disapproval from family members. The first is that only a minority of the female gurus in the present study have chosen celibacy. Second, the desire to remain celibate is rarely accompanied by a wish to embrace *sannyāsa*. Given the radical nature of *sannyāsa* as a lifestyle, characterized by a dramatic initiation ritual where the adept is supposed to symbolically throw away the past and all prior human ties, it might be easy to understand why it has been subjected to disapproval and suspicion from family members.

Another reason why the decision to remain celibate has been relatively smooth for female gurus might have to do with the women's socioreligious background. As previously noted, a majority of them come from a well-to-do, "high-caste" background and are often well

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[226] Interview with Anandmurti Gurumaa in Gannaur (Haryana), 21.1.2006.
[227] Interview with Anandmurti Gurumaa in Gannaur (Haryana), 21.1.2006.
[228] Interview with Anandmurti Gurumaa in Gannaur (Haryana), 21.1.2006.

educated. In other words, they belong to the privileged strata of society. As Anandmurti Gurumaa's case testifies, it is likely that this privileged socioreligious status gives women the self-confidence to face challenges and makes them emotionally equipped to withstand their families' opposition.

Additionally, opting for a life of celibacy for spiritual reasons ought not to be more controversial for Indian people than it would be for Western parents finding out that their daughter intends to become a Christian nun. I am even inclined to believe that given the centrality of spirituality in Indian culture, permeating all aspects of life, and the valorization of it, opting for a celibate life is likely to be met with more acceptance in India than it would among most secularized westerners. I also believe that the women's strong determination and uncompromising attitude towards celibacy has had a decisive impact on their social environment, making its acceptance easier for all involved.

There are, however, exceptions, and the case of Sudhamani (1953–) from Kerala, later known as Amritanandamayi, is one of them. Sudhamani, who was physically and emotionally abused for her spiritual dedication during her upbringing, very determinedly resisted her parents' attempts to marry her and chose the path of celibacy. Already when she was in her teens, and in accordance with the Indian custom of the days, her parents tried several times to marry her without her agreement. *Svāmī* Amritaswarupananda, the author of her hagiography claims that her father and mother were afraid than an unmarried daughter would give them bad reputation. However, the very thought of marriage made Sudhamani sick and he recounts that she did all that she could to scare away the prospective bridegrooms presented to her.

The third time a boy was invited to her parents' home, Sudhamani threatened him by screaming and waving a pestle, until the boy ran away (Swami Amritasvarupananda 1994: 75). When her parents later tried to marry her off to another boy, Sudhamani angrily warned them: "If you succeed in giving me in marriage, I will kill the man, and then come back to Idamannel" [her home]" (Swami Amritasvarupananda 1994: 91). Finally, Sudhamani's parents consulted a famous Vedic astrologer for advice. After having checked her horoscope, the astrologer turned to her father and told him very seriously: *This girl is a mahatma!* [a great soul] (Swami Amritasvarupananda 1994: 91).

He warned them that if they tried again to marry her, unlucky things would happen in their life. The astrologer's message had a decisive impact on Sudhamani's parents who once and for all renounced all attempts to get their daughter married.

## 7. When family members become disciples: Reversing the familial hierarchy

We have seen that withdrawing physically from the world and leaving families in order to undertake spiritual pursuits is not a usual option embraced by the women in the present study. Although most of the gurus have chosen to remain within marital ties while establishing their new guru-status, thus following the role prescribed for them by the *dharmaśāstras*, their bonds with family members and relatives might still be subjected to many challenges, and changes in family relationship might occur.

Observations from my field-studies indicate that when women take the step to embrace spiritual renunciation and become spiritual leaders within the ties of married life – a process often extending over many years – fathers, mothers, husbands, children, and relatives are invariably affected by their decision. With the decision to dedicate themselves to full-time spirituality, the lives, thoughts, and religious involvement of female gurus go through a tangible shift. From having exclusively devoted themselves to domestic and/or maternal duties, the primary center of their interest becomes devotion and surrender to God. Accordingly, a re-organization of family structures takes place, and in that process, my material indicates, marriage and blood-relationships are subordinated to spiritual involvement. Accordingly, husbands, children, parents, relatives, and friends end up in the background, playing a subordinate role in the gurus' lives, and it is likely that friends and family might be deeply affected by such a shift of emphasis.

My material indicates that, not infrequently, family members become followers, and when that happens, it largely alters the family's power structure in what might be perceived as an inversion of power positions. Whereas woman's primary role was formerly based on prevailing hierarchical values, where a wife is supposed to submit to her husband, her new role is based on power and spiritual superiority. An

interesting question to consider in that respect is how family and friends experience that reversal of power positions. Another issue is whether gurus experience a conflict between the demands of their social role as wives, mothers, and daughters, and the demands of their spiritual role as ascetics, and which strategies they make use of in order to reconcile such differing demands.

Lisa Lassell Hallstrom reports that in her early teens, Anandamayi Ma used to perform household tasks cheerfully in her husband's house, thus fulfilling her *strīdharma*, or the duties expected of her as dutiful wife. Already at that time, however, she could be found "inert on the kitchen floor," but at first, these trancelike states were apologized for and quickly forgotten (Lassell Hallstrom 1999: 65). From the age of eighteen, however, she started challenging the traditional husband-wife relationship in new ways. She became less and less able to fulfill her *strīdharma* because of increasingly frequent ecstatic trance-like states that affected her ability to perform household work. It was also at this time that she totally withdrew from sexual activity (Lipski 1996: 6–8).

Althought Anandamayi's husband Bholanath could cope with such an unusual marriage, and accepted the situation relatively quickly, we are told that he received much criticism from friends and relatives (Lipski 1996: 8). Anandamayi Ma's unconventional behavior, expressing divine ecstasy and falling unconscious in the presence of outsiders, was perceived as an improper form of conduct for a woman, bringing shame to family members (Lipski 1996: 11). She was criticized for receiving people at *darśans*, thus challenging the rules of the *pardā* custom of the times, which demanded that women should always be veiled and never seen by men (Lipski 1996: 8).

Another source of tension between Bholanath and his relatives and friends was the emergence of a new "rapport de force" between Anandamayi Ma and him. In a society where a man is supposed to be at the head of the family, one of her cousins found it provoking that she had been initiated while her husband had not. The fact that Anandamayi Ma became Bholanath's guru some months later and that she personally initiated him did not mend matters (Lipski 1996: 13). However, Bholanath did not pay too much attention to that criticism as he was fully focused upon his spiritual practices, and one

month before his death, he fully embraced the ascetic life and took the vows of *sannyāsa* (Lassell Hallstrom 1999: 64).

Anandamayi Ma's example shows that subordinating the sociocultural role to the guru status has specific characteristics and implications which challenge socioreligious values, leading to transgressions. These transgressions do not revolve primarily around "caste" regulations but around gender expectations. As a woman coming from a traditional "high-caste" Bengali family at the beginning of the twentieth century, she was expected to know her place and follow certain rules expected of her, such as refraining from "improper" conduct and submitting to her husband.

Godavari Ma (1914–1990) from Sakori in Maharashtra is another guru whose former family members became followers. According to her biographer, her guru Upasani Baba married her to Vishnupant Chandorkar when she was ten years old, but she never lived with her husband. After the marriage ceremony, Vishnupant went to Mumbai to complete his studies while Godavari Ma stayed in Sakori. The marriage was eventually annulled and Vishnupant remarried and had a daughter. Later on, Vishnupant's daughter was initiated by Godavari Ma and took the monastic vows as a *kanyā* (nun) at the *āśram* while Vishnupant's family members became Godavari Ma's devotees (Sahukar 1979: 21–22).

A change in the family's power structure is also found among the women presented in Chapter II. Whereas Madhobi Ma's husband is not a follower, their two sons, Ravi and Purnananda, as well as their daughter Dipa, have become her disciples, and Madhobi Ma has already chosen her son Purnananda as her successor. Purnananda follows the traditional rules of ideal discipleship. He received initiation into the prestigious orthodox ritual of *daṇḍa sannyāsa* when he was fourteen years old. Before the initiation, Madhobi Ma reports that he was fed by others and treated like a king for one year. He ate only boiled meals and had to beg his food once a month. This was followed by a period of *guruseva* (the spiritual practice of service to the guru) at his mother's home. Despite the fact that Purnananda was initiated into the most orthodox and prevalent form of *sannyāsa dikṣa*, Madhobi

Ma claims that he will probably marry in the future because celibacy is not compulsory in the *śākta mārga* to which they belong.[229]

The most noteworthy example of change in family structure I came in contact with is found in the relationship between Satguru Jnanananda Sarasvathi and her youngest son Hariprasad. Satguru Jnanananda Sarasvathi lives in a house in a well-to-do area of Chennai with her youngest son serving her as secretary and attendant. When I met Jnanananda Sarasvathi in Chennai, what I found most impressive was the respect and devotion displayed by her son. Hariprasad was full of deference toward his mother, being by her side continuously in order to attend to her slightest needs, as is traditionally expected in a guru-disciple relationship.

When Hariprasad spoke to his mother, he hid his mouth behind his hand in order not to blow on her face, a usual Indian practice when speaking to people of higher position. When I happened to refer to his mother as "Mataji," he instantly corrected me with "Satguru," thus pointing out for me that the term "Mataji" was nor deferential enough for such a divine being. This deference is mentioned in Satguru Jnanananda Sarasvathi's hagiography, which reports that her husband had great respect for her and considered her as his guru. Although he had to face criticism from relatives, and was sometimes subjected to fears and doubts, it is said that his surrender to the "divine will" was "unconditional and total" (*The Divine Descent* 1976: 23). We are also told that nowadays, Satguru Jnanananda Sarasvathi's children have great admiration for their mother as the following quotation suggests:

> All the children have received spiritual training under the guidance of Mother whom they consider only as their Guru. They have been given Mantra upadesa at an early age itself. They go through austerities often imposed on them by the Divine with love and spontaneous joy. (*The Divine Descent* 1976: 23)

Satguru Jnanananda Saravathi feels grateful to have such a kind family, well aware that it is unusual that family members are so supportive.[230]

[229] Field notes, Delhi, 29.10.2001; 30.10.2001.
[230] Field notes, Chennai (Tamil Nadu), 29.10.1999.

The transition unfolding from marital to spiritual status is not always appreciated by family members, as the life-story of Anasuya Devi from Andhra Pradesh exemplifies. Anasuya Devi's disciple, Richard Schiffman, claims that when devotees started gathering around her, her husband Nanagaru was often jealous of the attention given to her by others. He could not understand that the woman he had married was now worshiped as a superhuman being. Nor was he fond of male devotees touching and massaging her feet and placing their heads in her lap. His frustration would sometimes manifest itself by his beating and abusing her (Schiffman 2001: 224).

However, in time, Nanagaru understood that he had to disregard such conventions. Richard Schiffman tells us that eventually, Nanagaru set aside all sense of possessiveness, thus making his wife accessible to the public, and that he finally accepted her role as a spiritual leader. From that time onwards, when speaking with followers, he never referred to her as "my wife" but as "your mother" (Schiffman 2001: 225). Similarly, Anasuya Devi's daughter Hyma never regarded her mother as an ordinary person but as an object of devotion available to all. When friends would say "your mother" to her, she would answer "our mother." It is said that Hyma spent hours before her mother's photograph, worshiping her by singing devotional songs, repeating her name, and offering food to her picture (Schiffman 2001: 238).

Shakti Devi presented in Chapter II, recounts that her spiritual awakening has had a profound impact on her family relationships. From that time onward, she lost interest in worldly obligations such as cooking and taking care of others. She says that nowadays, chanting the thousand names of the goddess, performing *pūjās*, and being in the company of the like-minded are what really matters to her. Given that Shakti Devi claims to have much more affinity with her followers than with her own children and relatives, she says she is not fond of associating with them too often. When she does, however, sometimes consent to do so, she claims that it is more for their sake than for her own. She acknowledges that after divorcing, she had weekly contact with her young children and used to travel with them. However, she confesses that it was more a matter of duty than of ge-

nuine interest. Nowadays, she says she has affection for her children but no attachments.[231]

In my contact with Shakti Devi, I have, however, often questioned her so-called claims of non-attachment toward family members. The second time I met her, her daughter was pregnant and she was about to become a grandmother for the first time. Shakti Devi had strong ambivalent feelings towards the new situation and often quarreled with her daughter, as she did not share her daughter's inclination for a worldly life, nice clothes, jewelry, her husband, and the unborn baby.[232]

## 8. Guruhood and widowhood

According to Brahmanic views expressed in different texts such as Manusmṛti, widowhood is considered particularly polluting and inauspicious (*amaṅgalī*), given that a widow is perceived as not having been strong enough to ensure her husband's longevity. Accordingly, a woman is expected to remain faithful to her husband even after his death. She is not supposed to remarry, but instead should live a life of restraint, poverty and austerity (Manusmṛti, V.158). A widow is expected to shave her head, and eat only one meal a day. She must also refrain from wearing jewelry, colored clothes, and perfumes, and stop applying *kuṅkum* to her forehead, all signs linked to a married status and considered particularly auspicious. Moreover, she has to perform religious rituals every day in remembrance of her dead husband. Commenting on the issue of widowhood, the author of the Manusmṛti is not in a benevolent mood: "After her husband is dead, she may voluntarily emaciate her body by eating pure flowers, roots, and fruits; but she must never mention even the name of another man" (Manusmṛti, V.157).

Although the strict codes of conduct prescribed for widows are nowadays not as oppressive as in the time of Manusmṛti, an official report from the *Government's Ministry of Education and Social Welfare* in 1974 claims that "a distinct contrast between the status of a widow and a Sumangali is characteristic of India as a whole" (Narayanan 1990: 80).

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231 Field notes, (Tamil Nadu), 3.2.2004.

232 Field notes, (Tamil Nadu), 22.2.2006.

> A widow is barred from active participation in auspicious occasions. Besides the items of decoration associated with the married state, she is expected to discard colourful clothes, glass bangles, wearing of flowers, and attractive jewellery. Plain white colour is associated with widowhood, and by implication is forbidden traditionally for Sumangali, i.e., one whose husband is alive. (Narayanan 1990: 80)

These negative perceptions of widowhood in India have received Anandmurti Gurumaa's attention in a somewhat ironical quotation.

> If a [woman] dies before her husband, it takes only 2 minutes in India for widowers to get remarried. But if a woman is widowed, then she is told: "Now you must wear a white sari. Do not dress up or use any makeup. Otherwise other men will glance desirously at you. Your character will be damaged. So, sit and chant Lord *Rama*'s name." (*Shakti*: 17)

These misogynist views are also reflected in common popular beliefs. Embracing the path of spiritual renunciation is considered a way of escaping from an inauspicious status as the following comment on *sādhvīs* found on the Internet suggests:

> Most of them are old, having become sadhvis after they widowed. This reflects the generally subordinate position of women in Indian society – the popular belief is that women have to be born again as men before they can be spiritually liberated – and the even more marginal position of widows. Choosing the sadhu life was – and still is – about the only respectable way to escape from the "living death" of widowhood.[233]

Once again, one reason why such stereotyped perceptions of widowhood prevail in certain contexts is that they are believed to reflect real life. In a study examining the position of widows in the ancient Near East, and more specifically in male-dominated societies such as Israel and Mesopotamia, Karel van der Toorn has shown that perceptions of women's vulnerability are more prescriptive than descriptive

[233] http://www.adolphus.nl/sadhus/sadhvi.html

(van der Toorn 1995: 13). She claims that in the ancient Near East, widows were perceived as women in need, and made prototypes of the unprotected and unprivileged. As such, they were in need of protection (van der Toorn 1995: 2). This presumed poverty and vulnerability was considered to be a spiritual quality, giving rise, among other things, to the stereotype of the pious woman, dependent on God (van der Toorn 1995: 6). Van der Toorn suggests that one reason for stressing the social and emotional weakness of widows, despite the existence of actual, well-to-do widows in the ancient Near East, may have been men's fear of women's strength and independence (van der Toorn 1995: 2). By providing models of feminine virtues, women could be kept within bounds, and thus controlled and held in a position of submission and obedience (van der Toorn 1995: 13).

Similarly, my material indicates that stereotyped perceptions of widowhood do not reflect women's actual lives. As far as the seventy female gurus in the present study are concerned, I have not found any evidence supporting the contention that women would choose to become renunciants out of a feeling of deprivation entailed by their widowed status.[234] I suggest that several factors might be involved in that process. First, what is immediately noticeable in my study is that only a few women chose renunciation after they became widows. Moreover, my material indicates that of the few women who actually did, their strong religious inclinations arose long before they were widowed. Devi Shakuntala *gosvāmī* (ca. 1936–) from the Rādhāvallabha-tradition in Vrindavan was widowed at a young age. When she was twenty-three years old, she married the late Radha Ranjan *gosvāmī*, and gave birth to a son, Anuraga. Only one year after marriage, Devi Shakuntala *gosvāmī*'s husband died in a traffic accident. According to her, she did not first start guiding people after that occurrence. She claims instead to have started delivering religious talks from a very young age, as early as when she was only three years old. Nowadays, she gives spiritual guidance to followers in her *āśram* in Vrindavan.[235]

Early spiritual inclinations are also characteristic of a few women who have chosen to live close to holy persons. For those women who

[234] Catherine Ojha (1981: 262) has made the same observations.
[235] Field notes, Vrindavan (Uttar Pradesh), 14.11.2000.

have married a guru, continuing their husband's mission after his death has been a matter of course and has happened quite naturally. This was, for example, the case for Krishnabai (1903–1989) from Kanhangad (Kerala). Krishnabai married K. Laxman Rao and gave birth to two children. After the loss of her husband when she was twenty years old, she became a disciple of the famous male guru Ramdas. Three years later, she is said having achieved enlightenment, and eventually she became a guru in her own right (Satchidananda 1998: 1–2). This is also the case for Siddhi Ma who did not marry her guru, Neem Karoli Baba, but has been associated with him for more then fifty years. She was married and only became a full-time disciple after the death of her husband. After Neem Karoli Baba's death, Siddhi Ma started being viewed by many as a spiritual leader in her own right, in spite of the fact that, officially, Neem Karoli Baba remains at the center of worship (Vigne 1991: 206).

The evidence that most of the contemporary female spiritual masters of my study did not choose spirituality out of social deprivation differs greatly from Sondra L. Hausner and Meena Khandelwal's own conclusions in their study of female renunciants in South Asia. These divergent points of view are, however, not particularly surprising given that while most of Hausner and Khandelwal's women come from "lower Hindu castes or disadvantaged groups," most of the women in the present study are "high-caste" and well-to-do (Hausner and Khandelwal 2006: 4).

A plausible explanation why some of the women of my study have chosen to devote themselves to full-time spirituality after their husbands' deaths might be the fact that they no longer have obligations, and are no longer expected to fulfill their *strīdharma*. Hence, they might feel free to dedicate themselves to their spiritual aspirations with a clear conscience, without the interference of relatives and/or the competition of a husband. Gayatri Devi's example is illustrative in that respect. In an autobiographical sketch recorded in *One Life's Pilgrimage*, Gayatri Devi (1906–1995), one of her uncle *svāmī* Paramananda's female disciples who himself was Vivekananda's disciple, recounts how she came to dedicate herself to full-time spirituality after her husband's death. Gayatri Devi had strong religious aspirations already from childhood. She was highly inspired by Rāmāyaṇa when she was nine years old and read Vivekananda's letters when she was

twelve (Devi 1977: 2). Although she came from "a progressive family," her father was very firm on one point: he did not believe that daughters should remain single because, as he used to say, "In our society a woman has no status unless she is married" (Devi 1977: 2; 5). Accordingly, Gayatri Devi was forced to go through what she calls "an inevitable marriage" when she was seventeen years old, a decision that threw her "into a pool of unhappiness" (Devi 1977: 6).

Fortunately for Gayatri Devi, her husband died unexpectedly after "three fateful years" of marriage, partly releasing her from social ties (Devi 1977: 6–7). Shortly before her husband's death, she had met her uncle, *svāmī* Paramananda, from the *Ramakrishna Order of America* in Kolkata. Immediately after her husband's death, she was offered the opportunity to join his spiritual community in America. Although the decision to leave India put her into inner conflict because, as she puts it, "even a widowed daughter-in-law belongs to her husband's family," she left Kolkata for California two months later where she was spiritually active until her death in 1995 (Devi 1977: 7).

The present section suggests that deprivation theory is inadequate for interpreting the great variety of women's spiritual expressions, as it fails to do justice to the unusually strong commitment and spiritual abilities that such a lifestyle entails. In my view, spiritual renunciation is not meant for everybody because of the arduous endeavor it involves in terms of spiritual austerities. Moreover, the women in the present study are not only spiritual renunciants, they are also religious leaders. In order to achieve spiritual leadership, special abilities and a sense of profound commitment based on sound knowledge are required and these abilities can never be merely improvised. Accordingly, it goes without saying that widowhood in itself cannot be the only reason for choosing a life of full-time dedication to spirituality.

## 9. Guruhood and divorce

Through history, there have been times when the demands of a private pursuit of asceticism have conflicted with the householder's social responsibilities. That was specifically the case for medieval female *bhakti* saints. As Madhu Kishwar puts it:

> One significant difference was that while male *bhaktas* could follow their chosen path while remaining house-

> holders, this was near [sic] impossible for women. The vast majority of women *bhakta* poets in one way or another opted out of married and domestic life, and remained childless. A Tukaram could deal with a noncooperative wife by ignoring her, for she could only object to his way of life; she could not actively obstruct it. But for a Mirabai or a Bahinabai, the impediments created by husband or in-laws took the form of violence that could easily have proved fatal. Thus, most women *bhakta* poets could proceed on their chosen path only by discarding the marital ties altogether. Some refused marriage, others walked out of oppressive marriages. (Kishwar 1989: 5)

The famous female saints Lalleśvarī from Kashmir, born in the fourteenth century CE, and Akkamahādēvi (1106–1167 CE), from Karnataka, are two examples of women who were unable to reconcile their *dharma* (social duty) with their devotion to God. After years of harassment from her in-laws and indifference from her husband, Lalleśvarī left home in order to become a wandering singer. Akkamahādēvi, similarly walked out of an unhappy marriage (Kinsley 1981: 84–87).

As previously mentioned, I started my research with the life stories of medieval female saints in mind, believing that most contemporary female gurus had a similar destiny, meeting resistance from relatives for their spiritual aspirations. However, my material indicates that divorcing, or leaving the husband when the husband and/or joint family are not supportive of a woman's spiritual inclinations is not common among the female gurus in my study. As far as I am aware, only six or 10.5 % of those in my sample whose marital status can be discerned (57) are either divorced or separated.

One contemporary female guru who walked out of an oppressive family situation is Shyama Ma (1916–1999) from Vrindavan. She did not divorce formally, but just left her husband and in-laws after years of harassment from a mother-in-law who could not accept her spiritual inclinations. When she was eleven years old, Shyama Ma married into a prosperous family and eventually gave birth to sons and daughters. From a young age, she had to observe the practice of *pardā*, i.e., living in seclusion, and take care of domestic chores (Jalan 1977: 17–18). After some years, she felt imprisoned and longed to dedicate

her life to devotion and God-realization. When she was twenty-five years old, Shyama Ma came in contact with her in-laws' guru. He initiated her at the initiative of her mother-in-law who believed that initiation would be auspicious for making her daughter-in-law pregnant with a son. Shyama Ma followed the guru's instructions with great discipline and devotion for six months, reciting a mantra a hundred-thousand times each day, and refraining from taking any food but a quarter pint of milk a day (Jalan 1977: 19–20).

In time, Shyama Ma's mother-in-law understood that her daughter-in-law did not care at all about giving birth to a son but instead longed to realize God. She started harassing her, which turned out to have a dramatic outcome (Jalan 1977: 22–23). At the age of twenty eight, Shyama Ma finally decided to leave her husband's house for Vrindavan, fifteen kilometers away. The final decision was made after her mother-in-law threw away a picture of Kṛṣṇa and a photograph of her guru that she worshiped during daily *pūjās*. One night, Shyama Ma twisted an old sari, tied one end of it to the balcony, and slipped down onto the ground. After some days, she learned that her relatives were searching for her and she realized that she had to move away to a distant place. Dressed as a poor ascetic, and besmeared with earth on her entire face and body, she took the train for the holy city of Prayag and according to her disciple Vijaya Laxmi Jalan, she never came back home again (Jalan 1977: 32–34).

Shakti Devi from Tamil Nadu, portrayed in Chapter II, not only left her husband but also took the step of divorcing and remarrying. Shakti Devi married Ramesh and gave birth to two children. The marriage was arranged as she had believed that whatever her parents would decide for her would be good. Nowadays, when she looks back on her original situation, she believes that she was not mature enough for marriage. When Shakti Devi's children were three and seven years old, she told her husband that she wanted to leave him and he consented. Soon after, she divorced him and left the children in their father's care. The reason why she divorced, she says, was partly because of the ill-treatment she had to endure from her husband, and partly because of her spiritual aspirations. She had been initiated by a male guru some years before, and had fallen in love with him. Shakti Devi's

decision to marry him after her divorce was taken after her guru had told her that she had been his wife in a previous birth.[236]

As mentioned in Chapter II, Shakti Devi and her second husband have now been married for some twenty-five years, and although they live in the same city, they each have their own separate *āśrams* located in different apartments where they receive devotees. One of the reasons why they live in separate homes, she says, is that her husband's devotees have never accepted her. According to Shakti Devi, *Svāmī* is too soft and kind and lets his personal attendant dominate him and tell him what to do. Moreover, *Svāmī* and his personal attendant have a strong fellowship with each others and Shakti Devi feels excluded from their common decisions.[237] The reason why *Svāmī*'s close devotees do not accept Shakti Devi as an equal is, according to her, threefold: because she is a woman, because she is divorced and remarried, and because she belongs to a lower *varṇa* (*vaiśya*) than her husband (*brāhmaṇa*).[238]

One example of how persistent, old-fashioned values still operate in the social lives of Indian women is worth mentioning in this regard. When Shakti Devi's daughter was to be married some years ago, her future mother-in-law forbade Shakti Devi from having *kuṅkum* in her hair at the wedding, a symbol of married status considered extremely auspicious. According to Indian tradition, while a married woman is considered *sumaṅgalī*, i.e., auspicious, a remarried women is viewed as *amaṅgalī* or inauspicious, and should therefore refrain from wearing marks associated with a happy marital state. The reason why the in-laws' reaction was so strong is that they feared that Shakti Devi would become the laughing-stock of the wedding gathering if she fulfilled her intentions. At first, Shakti Devi intended to defy this prohibition, but later on, she felt so offended that she chose not to participate in her daughter's wedding.[239]

Traditionally, there is a social and cultural stigma attached to female widowhood and divorce, and in many parts of India, widowed and divorced women are considered extremely inauspicious. Whereas widowers could remarry, widows could not, and there were times

[236] Field notes, (Tamil Nadu), 3.2.2004.
[237] Field notes, (Tamil Nadu), 5.2.2004.
[238] Field notes, (Tamil Nadu), 20.2.2004.
[239] Field notes, (Tamil Nadu), 20.2.2004.

when divorce was not permitted. Female remarriage after divorce was even more inconceivable, and therefore not alluded to (Harlan and Courtright 1995: 13-14). Such views still prevail in today's India and are, among other things, reflected in a quote from Shakti Devi's e-mail, calling her remarriage "a revolution in [her] personal life."[240] Shakti Devi is thus suggesting that her marriage break-up is a radical shift from what is traditionally expected of Indian women, and the refusal of her in-laws to recognize and accept her new marital status should therefore be understood in light of such a view.

## 10. Conclusion

Mainstream Hindu culture presents male and female subcultures, displaying distinctive features and reflecting a wide range of ascetic options. This is especially evident for female gurus' religiosity where variety and diversity are key characteristics of female renunciation. In the present chapter, I have focused on female guruhood related to marital status. I have also examined the compatibility of dedication to spirituality and social duty, and the strategies that female gurus make use of in order to reconcile two seemingly divergent realms.

My investigation points towards a predominance of married women among the seventy female gurus under study. Given that particular emphasis is placed on householdership in Hindu contexts, I would like to argue that several influential factors can be identified. One such factor is that renunciation, understood as celibacy, was traditionally the prerogative of men alone, a custom which obviously is still alive in contemporary Hinduism. Moreover, the emphasis on marriage and motherhood as the means of fulfillment for women, which is part of the Indian cultural heritage, is another significant factor. That valorization is expressed through the ideology of *strīdharma* and *pativratādharma* related to the *gṛhasthāśrama* stage of the *varṇāśramadharma* paradigm where marriage is considered a sacred duty.

Another crucial factor is the impact of *bhakti*, which perceives spirituality as compatible with social expectations. According to *bhakti* theology the essence of which is embodied in the message of the Bhagavadgītā, marriage is never an obstacle to salvation as it is believed that with "right" understanding, embracing the *gṛhastha-* stage can be

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[240] E-mail from Shakti Devi, 27.8.2005.

a vehicle for attaining spiritual perfection. Accordingly, the proponents of *bhakti* believe that one does not need to "leave the world behind," but that ascetic-like lives can be pursued at home through rigorous spiritual practices such as studying scriptures, meditating, fasting, withdrawing from ordinary society, and leading a life of chastity.

Another influential factor involved in the predominance of married women among contemporary female gurus is the impact of *tantra* and *śākta* traditions, theologies that do not consider marriage to be a hindrance to spiritual involvement. In their attempt to integrate material and spiritual life, *tantra* and *śākta* ideologies reject traditional forms of asceticism based on notions of ritual purity/impurity, such as the suppression or mastering of the body. Instead, they make use of the body in order to achieve salvation.

A minority of the seventy women in the present study are unmarried, having actively chosen celibacy. From the female gurus' perspective, celibacy is never considered as a means of escape from family, but is instead considered a positive and compelling religious ideal. A natural inclination toward celibacy, often from a young age, and a desire to live an independent life are reasons given for choosing lifelong celibacy. The spiritual call sanctions a woman's decision to detach herself from parents, spouse, siblings, and children, and from the societal norms and values she is supposed to embody.

Whereas widowed women are still stigmatized in Indian society, entailing that choosing to renounce the world is for many the only way to live a decent life, my material indicates that only a few female gurus have chosen to embrace full-time spirituality after their husbands' death. Those who have, however, chosen to become gurus cite religious reasons for their choice, claiming that they were already deeply involved in spiritual practices during, and often before marriage. My material also indicates that divorce is still highly controversial in Indian culture and still cause for discrimination. The example of Shakti Devi, who renounced a secure employment after divorce in order to pursue full-time spirituality, and now has to endure the consequences of her decision, is particularly enlightening in that regard.[241]

[241] E-mail from Shakti Devi, 27.8.2005.

In an investigation of medieval poet-saints, Ramanujan states that while medieval "upper-caste" male saints had to fight a whole socioreligious system, internalizing the enemy within, women saints' difficulties revolved around family and family values. As he puts it, holy women did not struggle "with [their] own temptations but with husband and priest, and with […] wifely and maternal roles" (Ramanujan 1995: 324). In other words, medieval Indian women faced difficulties unknown to their male counterparts. What was controversial in their decision to lead a life of celibacy and contemplation is that it completely inverted the gender-stereotypes of their cultural milieu. Instead of being content with married life, gladdened by the births of sons, and attentive to needs of others, they chose to follow a path they found irresistible, concentrating their lives primarily on their own self-fulfillment.

Looking at the present situation among the seventy gurus in the present study, I have not found evidence that their position as spiritual masters would be particularly threatening to their familial and social contexts. My material indicates that the initial resistance they frequently meet at the beginning of their spiritual career appears to be of relatively short duration. Interestingly, my study also shows that when women take the step to dedicate themselves to spiritual life and become spiritual leaders within the ties of married life, their strategy is to subordinate marriage to spirituality. While they do not dissociate themselves from husbands, children, or relatives, most of them subordinate family relationships to spiritual ties, given that God is the primary focus of their devotion.

Despite the fact that female gurus in the present study do not always follow traditional sociocultural and socioreligious expectations, they are nonetheless venerated. At the beginning of the present chapter, I asked in what ways women can be considered "ascetics" and I would like to conclude with that issue. Ideally, a man has been and still is allowed to leave his family for spiritual practices. He might embrace the third *āśrama* and thereby become a full-time renunciant without any familial obligations. He might also become a *sannyāsin*, an option generally not encouraged for women, however, as in theory, *sannyāsa* initiation is primarily reserved for men. Given that only a few women in the present study are formal *sannyāsinīs* and/or have

chosen to leave their family for the path of solitary renunciation, their spiritual status is quite ambiguous.

My material indicates that whereas most female gurus, whether married, divorced, widowed, or celibate, are not ascetics in the strict sense of the term, all have chosen to embrace a non-sannyasic, ascetic-like lifestyle. Their self-chosen renunciation and detachment from the world govern their values and daily activities significantly, and are reflected, among other things, in self-imposed religious austerities within marriage where dispassion (*vairāgya*), discipline, self-control (*tyāga*), and sacrifice are part of their daily spiritual practices. Jnananda Sarasvathi's example of the pursuit of a quasi-monastic life in her home for prolonged periods of time is particularly illustrative in that respect.

Whereas the self-imposed practices of self-denial followed by most married women in Indian society and exemplified through the pursuit of *vratas* display similarities with the gurus' austerities, the two are also distinguished from each other, given that *vratas* appear to be almost always directed towards material benefits. In contrast, the self-imposed austerities performed by the female gurus in the present study have a "higher" purpose directed toward spiritual salvation. Accordingly, I claim that although female gurus can not be labeled "ascetics" in the strict sense of the term, their self-chosen austerities within the context of an ascetic lifestyle definitely suggest that they are full-time spiritual renunciants.

# VII – The Play of the Goddess

During my various stays in different *āśrams*, one thing I found particularly noteworthy was the great respect and reverence paid to female spiritual masters. Temples are built in the female gurus' honor and throughout the day, they are worshiped with different rituals as the embodiment of the divine feminine. A typical comment from followers could be as follows: "You may think that Mā is an ordinary person, sitting and speaking with us like anyone else. But she is not. In fact, you can't even get of a spark of her divine greatness." Referring to Anandamayi Ma, one devotee says: "She is not a human being. She is above that" (Lassell Hallstrom 1999: 156). According to followers, *svāmī* Amritaswarupananda, one of Amritanandamayi's closest disciples once said: "Although I have spent more than twenty-five years in Mother's presence, she still remains a mystery to me."[242]

Worship of the divine feminine has always been part of the Hindu landscape, not in term of abstract philosophical or theological thinking, but as a lived reality, expressed through interpersonal social relations (Patel 2005: 57). For the followers, female as well as male gurus are not ordinary persons but are believed to manifest, mirror, or/and embody divinity. The gurus in the present study are no exception in that respect, and nearly all of them are understood as the embodiment of various goddesses of the Hindu pantheon. The goddess issue has been investigated by numerous scholars, including, among others, feminists whose studies have contributed to modifying prevailing understandings. From having been regarded as "exotic, primitive, and unimportant" in Western scholarship, the significance of feminine imagery is now widely accepted (Gross 1996: 85–86).

In order to further explore the phenomenon of Indian female guruhood and spiritual leadership in contemporary Hinduism, I will now examine one of the themes associated with it. The purpose of the present chapter is to investigate gurus as embodiments of the divine feminine, and given the vastness of the goddess-issue, and out of considerations of space, I will limit my discussion to a few issues. I start with a brief general survey of goddess imagery and worship in Hindu tradition and its impact on contemporary female guruhood. In addi-

[242] Field notes, Amritapuri (Kerala), 14.12.1999.

tion, two central key concepts associated with the Hindu goddess phenomenon are introduced: the *avatāra* paradigm and the concept of *śakti*.

This is followed by a short presentation of the notions of spontaneous and ritualized ecstasy which are closely associated with the divine feminine in what are understood as *bhāvas* or "moods" of the living goddess. Drawing from a few examples taken from my sample of seventy women, I show what these *bhāvas* look like during worship. Given that the states of spontaneous and ritualized ecstasy displayed by a few female gurus resemble certain states of ritual possession, I ask whether these *bhāva* states can be understood as such. Moreover, whereas followers do believe female gurus to be incarnations of the divine, one of the questions I address is how female gurus perceive the idea of divinity in a human body. Finally, I ask whether Hindu perceptions of female gurus as divine beings translate into an improvement of women's position in Indian society.

## 1. The thousand faces of the Indian goddess

The worship of God as the sacred feminine is one of the oldest forms of religious expression in India, and goddesses have therefore always constituted an important aspect of the Hindu pantheon. Contrary to orthodox Christian tradition where most feminine imagery of God disappeared from the religion by 200 CE, Hindu religion offers a wide spectrum of female deities. Despite clear historical evidence, it is often taken for granted in feminist literature that "primitive" civilizations were matriarchal.[243] This more or less corresponds to the myth of an idealized golden age believed to be a time of perfection. Shashi Bhusan Dasgupta, for example, claims that Mother worship arose around a matriarchal social system (Dasgupta 1997: 49). Other scholars, such as Bhattacharyya (1999: 118–119), adopt a matriarchal view claiming that women had a stronger position than the one they came to occupy in the following centuries, though no strong evidence supports this. The view of a matriarchal golden age is supported by scholars in western countries such as the archeologist Marija Gimbutas. Howev-

[243] For an overview of the debate which took place around this issue, see Preston, "Goddess Worship: Theoretical Perspectives," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Mircea Eliade (ed.), Vol. 6, New York 1987, 53 –59.

er, Rita Gross, David Kinsley, Katherine Young, and Joan Townsend disagree with that standpoint (Gross 1996: 158).

Goddess worship is central in the *Devī*-myth found in Sanskrit literature such as the *purāṇas*, and particularly in texts such as the Devībhagavatam and the Devīmāhātmyam. The Devīmāhātmyam, also known as *Caṇḍī*, or "the angry, terrible, or passionate one," which is part of the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa (400–600 BCE), is translated as "The Specific Greatness (or Virtue) of the Goddess." A great part of the text deals with a cosmic battle where Dūrgā fights against demons threatening the entire universe. The great goddess Mahādevī is identified with Mahākālī, Mahālakṣmī, and Mahāsarasvatī, thus referring to the phases of destruction, preservation, and creation in the cosmic process (Mackenzie Brown 1990: 132–134). Coburn claims that "The *Devīmāhātmya* is not the earliest literary fragment attesting to the existence of devotion to a goddess figure, but it is surely the earliest in which the object of worship is conceptualized as Goddess, with a capital G" (Coburn 1991: 16). One later text is the Devī Gītā, a medieval Sanskrit text composed around the fifteenth century, and a partial imitation of the Bhagavadgītā. Far from being envisioned as a violent and blood-loving deity, the Goddess of the Devī Gītā, appears as a benign figure, a compassionate World-Mother (*jaganmātā*).[244]

Divine motherhood is a central aspect of goddess worship particularly emphasized and highly idealized in Indian contexts. Most devotees acknowledge that motherly virtues are some of the most compelling aspects of female gurus.[245] Motherhood, both biological and spiritual, is a symbol traditionally characterized by such inner qualities as unconditional love, forbearance, perseverance, compassion, and forgiveness, and as such is accorded a superior status. The centrality of motherhood is reflected in the famous quotation from the *upaniṣads*, *mātṛ devo bhava, pitṛ devo bhava, ācārya devo bhava, atithi devo bhava* (Taittirīya upaniṣad, I.11.2),[246] where the mother (*mātṛ*) is addressed first, before the father (*pitṛ*), the teacher (*ācārya*), and the guest (*atithi*),

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[244] See also Thomas B. Coburn, *Devī-Māhātmya: The Crystallization of the Goddess Tradition*, Delhi 1997.

[245] For male *gurus* perceived as fathers, see Måns Broo, 2003, p. 183.

[246] "Treat your mother like a god. Treat your father like a god. Treat your teacher like a god. Treat your guests like gods," Olivelle's translation, *The Early Upaniṣads*, p. 299.

all of whom have high social and spiritual status. Moreover, it is claimed that a mother should be regarded as a God.

Similar valorization of motherhood is found in Manusmṛti (II.145) where it is believed that from the point of view of reverence due, "The teacher is ten times greater than the tutor; the father is a hundred times greater than the teacher; but the mother is a thousand times greater than the father." This positive evaluation of motherhood is present in a number of different fields of Indian culture such as folklore, Hindu mythology, political ideology, contemporary cinema, and everyday family life (Allen 1990: 9).

Most of the women in the present study emphasize the notion of divine motherhood in their self representations. Speaking of herself as divine mother, Rajeshwari Devi (1930–1991) from Haridvar (Uttarakhand) claims as follows:

> "Mother" is the central figure in anyone's life. She gives us birth and she is our first teacher. We receive our first impressions of life in this world from her. She is our source of food, comfort and shelter, but even more than that, she is our source of love and security. The guidelines she offers in our early years help us negotiate our way through the maze of influences, good and bad that surround us as we grow up. A mother's function is two-fold, to give birth and then steer and nurture the child through to adulthood. An ordinary mother has many responsibilities, but an even greater responsibility rests upon the "spiritual mother" who initiates not one, but millions of aspirants into the spiritual life and guides them to spiritual maturity.[247]

In a book where Anasuya Devi's answers to her devotees' questions are quoted, we can read the following statement, pronounced by the guru: "I am not a spiritual teacher; you are not disciples. I am not a guide; you are not travellers. I am Mother; you are children," thus giving priority to her role as spiritual mother in her interaction with followers (Arms 1980: VIII).

Besides the aspect of divine motherhood, Indian goddesses are worshiped in a multitude of forms. They are not only worshiped as

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[247] http://www.manavdharam.org/mata_ji.html

great goddesses such as Durgā or Kālī, the *śakti* or (feminine) power of the God, or the *saptamātṛkā*, "seven mothers," but also in the form of temples, shrines, stones, mountains, natural phenomena (rivers), and male and female mediums possessed by the goddess, especially during different religious festivals. The goddess is also worshiped as wife, older woman, or young virgin girl, as in the Kūmarī tradition in Nepal.[248] Finally, the goddess is worshiped as spiritual master or guru, especially in areas where the goddess tradition has a central position such as Assam, Bengal, and South India.

A renaissance of goddess imagery and worship and *śaktī* ideology took place in Bengal in the nineteenth century with Ramakrishna who viewed his own wife, Sharada Devi, as the incarnation of Kālī. This renaissance coincides with the rise of the Indian nationalist movement in which the goddess Dūrgā, the warrior aspect of *śaktī*, came to symbolize the Hindu struggle against English colonialism. After Ramakrishna's death, Vivekananda claimed that Sharada Devi had been Ramakrishna's own *śaktī*. Ramakrishna's and Sharada Devi's examples were followed by Aurobindo Ghosh from Bengal, who established an *āśram* in Pondicherry (Tamil Nadu) together with Mira Alfassa Richard. Aurobindo used to refer to his own spiritual power as *puruṣa* while calling Mira Alfassa's power *śaktī* (Falk 1995: 317). Another renowned female Bengali guru was Anandamayi Ma, also identified with the goddess, and more particularly believed to be an incarnation of Devī. As I suggested previously, it is likely that Sharada Devi (1853–1920), Mira Alfassa (1878–1973) and Anandamayi Ma (1896–1982) are among the most significant sources of inspiration for the expanding prominence of women in positions of religious leadership that we are witnessing today.

There is evidence that most of the female gurus in the present study are identified with one or several specific goddesses of the Hindu pantheon. Amritanandamayi from Kerala is considered by many as the "incarnation," or more exactly, the "descent" of Devī, the Great Goddess. Karunamayi (1959–) is identified with Sarasvatī, the goddess of arts and knowledge. Indira Betiji *gosvāmi* (1939–) from Gujarat is regarded as the embodiment of the goddess Yamunā, one of the sa-

[248] See, for example, "The Goddess and Śākta Traditions", (chapter eight, 174–197), in Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, Cambridge 1996.

cred rivers of India. Like all Indian rivers, the river Yamunā is considered sacred, and the goddess Yamunā is associated with the creative powers animating all life. Madhobi Ma, portrayed in Chapter II, is regarded as Tārā. Tārā is not only worshiped as a Buddhist goddess, but is also central in Hindu *śākta* contexts in Birbhum area (West Bengal). She is regarded as the mother creator, representing the eternal life force fueling life. Sai Rajarajeshwari, also presented in Chapter II is regarded as a manifestation of Rājarājeśvarī, a South Indian *śākta* goddess believed to be the embodiment of *paraśākti* or universal power.

One interesting aspect related to Indian goddesses is the notion of Devī and Mahādevī. In most Hindu temples, goddesses are present along with their husbands: Śiva with Parvatī, Rāma with Sītā, Kṛṣṇa with Rādhā, and are considered manifestations of Devī. Yet, Mahālakṣmī temple in Mumbai, the temple of Kamakhya in Assam, Tārāpiṭh in West Bengal, and Vānavāsinī Devī Śaktipiṭh temple in Vindhyachal (Uttar Pradesh) are exclusively dedicated to Mahādevī, who stands alone unaccompanied by a husband. These temples are perceived by Hindus as places of power *(śaktipiṭh*) where the *śākti* is believed to be the strongest. The question is if we can find a parallel pattern among female gurus, between those standing beside their husband guru, and those standing on their own.

While working on the present study, I have come across a few examples of married couples dedicating their lives together to the service of people as gurus. These are primarily found in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. Annapuramba and Amritananda Natha Saraswati (1934–) are a married couple from Andhra Pradesh. Amritananda is a former university professor and a nuclear physicist scientist. He worked at the *Tata Institute of Fundamental Research* but resigned his career in 1981, after having been initiated into the *śrīvidyā upāsanā*. In 1983, he and his wife established *Devipuram*, a Hindu temple complex located near Vishakapatnam in Andhra Pradesh. Amritananda Natha is the author of many articles and books.[249]

Rama Mata Keshavadas (1955–) is another female guru who was married to a male guru, Sant Keshavadas from Mysore state in Karnataka (1934–1997). According to Internet sources, Sant Keshavadas be-

[249] http://devipuram.com/guruji/amritananda.html

gan his worldwide mission in 1966 and Rama Mata "assisted" him since their marriage.[250] Sant Keshavadas is said to have spoken eight languages, to be be the author of more than 50 books, to have composed 6000 *kīrtans*, and to be a "superb singer and story-teller", and an "eloquent speaker."[251] It is also said that he "delegated the responsibilities of his mission to his wife, Rama Mata, and empowered her with the guru lineage."[252]

As previously mentioned, Kalki and Amma from Andhra Pradesh are another such a couple, commonly portrayed together in numerous photographs. While Bhagavan is the frontfigure of the organization, delivering teachings, and maintening tight and regular contact with his worldwide following, Amma remains in the background. Amma is said to be "the embodiment of love," and her devotees report that "she has difficulty in saying no when asked," thus alluding to her believed inborn female kindness.[253]

The last example is the one of Rajeshwari Devi (1930–1991) who was born in Melgaon (Uttarakhand) and married a guru, Param Sant Sadgurudev Shri Hans Ji Maharaj.[254] It is said that Rajeshwari Devi "tended to keep a low profile," being "content to remain in the background" while her husband was alive.[255] It was first after her husband's death that she became a guru in her own right, taking over his mission. She preached all over India and abroad, teaching, among other things, that "each woman is an expression of the Divine Mother, the 'Shakti', and if women would realize this primordial power within themselves they could change the world."[256]

While focusing on married guru couples is beyond the scope of the present study, this rapid survey of facts, gleaned from various websites reveals that far more information is usually provided about the male partner in a "holy couple," than the female one. This is reflected in a presentation of male gurus as central figures in *āśram* activities while female gurus tend to occupy side roles in the common mission. The presentation of these holy couples is also highly stereotyped, fol-

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[250] http://www.vishwashantiashram.org/Bio.htm
[251] http://www.vishwashantiashram.org/Bio.htm
[252] http://tempelofcosmicreligion.org/htms/Namaste.htm
[253] http://www.atimetoheal-om.net/sec%20A%20-%20articles1-Amma&Bhagavan.htm
[254] http://www.manavdharam.org/jjm/2_bio_sketch.html
[255] http://manavdharam.org/mata_ji/sketch.html
[256] http://manavdharam.org/mata_ji/nature.html

lowing traditional notions of "femininity" and "masculinity." Whereas the males' achievements as authors, orators, and public spiritual guides, are emphasized, the women tend to be primarily praised for their loving, compassionate, and motherly qualities. These few examples, therefore, suggest that as in the Hindu pantheon, where Mahādevī, standing alone without her consort is regarded as a strong, feminine figure of power (*śākti*), female gurus working alone as spiritual leaders appear to represent more power that those accompanied by their guru husband.

## 2. The *avatāra* paradigm in Hindu thought

All religions have always offered mankind a way of bridging the distance between God and people, be it through saints, celestial beings, or angels. A feature common to both Christianity and Hinduism is the idea of divine descent in which God sends himself to earth as another being. While Christianity recognizes Jesus Christ as the sole incarnation of the divine in a human body, in Hindu thinking, it is believed that from time to time, the divine descends to earth in different human forms as *avatārs*, according to the rhythm of cyclic time composed of four *yugas*: the *kṛtayuga*, *tretāyuga*, *dvāparayuga*, and the present *kaliyuga*.

One of the central notions of Hindu mythology is the doctrine of *avatāra*, expounded in the Bhagavadgītā as follows:

6. Tho unborn, tho My self is eternal,
Tho Lord of Beings,
Resorting to My own material nature
I come into being by My own mysterious power.

7. For whenever of the right
A languishing appears, son of Bharata,
A rising up of unright,
Then I send Myself forth.

8. For protection of the good,
And for destruction of evil-doers,
To make a firm footing for the right,
I come into being in age after age.
Bhagavadgītā IV. 6 – 8

With these famous words uttered by Kṛṣṇa, God is believed to describe his descend to earth in human form. The word *avatāra*, usually translated by "descent," has unclear origins. According to Paul Hacker, the term was originally associated with the idea of "removal of a load" (Hacker 1978: 426). Eventually, it came to be equated with "descent," given that the purpose of an *avatār* is understood as "relieving the earth of a burden" (Hacker 1978: 426). The word is primarily associated with the God Viṣṇu and with the belief that God descends to earth and manifests himself as an *avatāra*, or Viṣṇu's incarnation. According to Bassuk, the earliest references to this doctrine appear "unambiguously for the first time" in the Bhagavadgītā (Bassuk 1987: 23).[257]

In mythology, Viṣṇu descends to earth in the form of Kṛṣṇa in order to defeat the demon Kaṃsa and to ensure the victory of the Paṇḍava brothers in their war against their cousins, the Kauravas. The purpose of an *avatār* is to restore and maintain the cosmic order, i.e., to reestablish righteousness in periods when it is threatened. In other words, an *avatār* is supposed to have been sent to earth to save humanity and to restore what is believed to be decadent *dharma*, a term which here can be translated as "duty" or "generally approved course of conduct for people." Kṛṣṇa not only acts as a guide but also as a model offering mankind a concrete example of divinity so that people may relate to God in a human form that they can understand and identify with. His task is to show the way from the ordinary mortal state to one of enlightened consciousness. Kinsley claims that the *avatāra* concept is also applied to other deities, not only male ones such as Śiva, but also the female Durgā, "to bless devotees with the presence of the divine, to rescue devotees from peril, or to reward them for heroic devotion or service" (Kinsley 1987: 15).

*Avatārs* are supposed to have a divine heavenly origin, to have no karma left to expiate, and to be conscious of their redemptive mission, so as to take upon themselves other people's karma in order to rescue them. Because of their presumed ability to incarnate in human beings, gods and goddesses are not perceived as distant heavenly figures but

[257] See also Geoffrey Parrinder, *Avatar and Incarnation: A Comparison of Indian and Christian Beliefs*, New York 1982 (1970).

as a living presence in most people's everyday life. As Madhu Kishwar expresses it:

> A special feature of Hindu *Sanatan Dharma* is that there is no sharp divide between the divine and the human. Various gods and goddesses take an *avatar* and descend on earth to appear before you like ordinary mortals in an intimate familial relationship. They are often willing to be judged by the same rules and moral yardsticks that one would use for any fellow human being. Devotees and non-devotees alike have the right to judge them by how well they perform or fail to perform those roles. They neither claim perfection nor do they command us to unquestioningly approve of all they do. They allow us the freedom to pass judgments on them, to condemn those of their actions that one considers immoral or unfair or to praise those actions one finds honourable or benevolent. (Kishwar 2003: 17)

According to Madhu Kishwar, Indian goddesses do not exclude each other from the pantheon but instead co-exist peacefully with each other. The martial goddess Durgā never considers herself superior to the self-effacing Sītā, as mutual acceptance is the rule. Instead of entering into competition with each others, goddesses are considered as different aspects or manifestations of feminine *śakti*, the primal energy and creative power believed to create, permeate, and sustain the whole universe (Kishwar 2003: 22).

## 3. *Śakti* and goddess worship

Given the centrality of the concept of *śakti* in Hindu spirituality, the followers of the goddess, or *śāktas*, worship the divine as *śakti,* the divine power identified as the Goddess. According to Kathleen Erndl, *śakti* is "a fluid and multivalent concept which is found in many different contexts and can be used, even manipulated, for many different purposes" (Erndl 2000: 92). It is mainly found in the Tantric literature of Bengal and Kashmir, and has mythological, metaphysical, and philosophical dimensions. According to Lynn Teskey Denton, whereas *tantra* stresses the superiority of the divine feminine and elevates *śakti*

as the source of power, *śākta* ideology idealizes the maternal function, and sees the divine mother in all women (Teskey Denton 2004: 119).

In its mythological dimension, *śakti* is identified with the Goddess. As a village goddess, she is often associated with worldly goals such as prosperity, fertility, and health. As Great Goddess, she is envisioned as the embodiment of the ultimate reality. Not only *śākta*-devotees are involved in Goddess-worship, but most Hindus dedicate themselves to it in one form or another. Both *śaivas* and *vaiṣṇavas* have incorporated the Goddess into their own traditions, where she is considered as the embodiment of the female power or *śakti.* Two aspects are present in *śakti*-theology: an empirical one, in which the union of male and female is central to the cosmogony, and a speculative one.

*Śakti* theology, the assertion that the Goddess is the all-pervading force of the universe, is a thoroughly world-affirming belief. *Śakti* theology views matter and spirit as one, both considered emanations of the Goddess. The Goddess is often understood as *prakṛti*, the matter-energy believed to constitute the basis of all creation, and as *māyā*. *Māyā*, which may be understood as the illusion or ignorance that entraps one in the world, often has negative connotations, given that it is seen as an obstacle to be overcome. However *māyā* is also understood as a necessary aspect of worldly existence, giving life to the world, and is viewed as the blessing of the Goddess (Erndl 1993: 31–32).

In its metaphysical conception, *śakti* is regarded as the all-pervasive dynamic and creative power of the Universe and is believed to be feminine. As mentioned previously, it is also associated with the feminine power of the male god. While the male god is regarded as static, and is dependent on female energy to maintain his power, *śakti* is understood as independent and complete in herself. At a theological level, *śakti* is believed to be the power bestowed on the disciple during the initiatory descent of spiritual power (*śaktipāta*).[258] This spiritual power, transmitted during *dīkṣā* (initiation) by the guru, is believed to have the capacity to awaken the dormant spiritual energy in believers.

[258] cf. what in Christian tradition is called "Holy Ghost" or God's Holy Spirit. References to the term *śaktipāta* are found in texts from the sixth to seventh centuries CE onward (Muller-Ortega 1997: 407).

## 4. The moods of the living goddess: ritualizing divine ecstasy

As examined in Chapter IV, one of the traits characterizing a number of female gurus is their natural ability to slip into altered states of consciousness. Some decades ago, Ma Anandamayi (1896–1982) from Bengal became a legend while still alive. Her utterly unconventional behavior, well-known for displaying ecstatic states of consciousness, attracted many followers from India as well from a number of Western countries. For the last couple of decades, Mata Amritanandamayi from Kerala has seen her popularity growing stronger and stronger all around the world. The combination of a tough childhood and adolescence, an utterly unconventional way of welcoming people at *darśan*, along with what appears to be a "superhuman" physical and psychic endurance, and a permanent state of mystical rapture sometimes manifested as an odd, trancelike behavior have exerted fascination and attracted many people around her.

My investigation of seventy female gurus indicates that on certain occasions, divinity is acted out by the women themselves through the practice of *bhāvas* by which gurus are believed to manifest one or several aspects of God as the sacred feminine. The term *bhāva*, widely used in *bhakti* circles, originates from the Sanskrit root *bhū-*, "to become," and is usually translated as "spiritual mood" or "ecstasy." Monier-Williams gives the following definitions of the term *bhāva*: "feeling," "sentiment," "state," "true condition," "mental state," "character," "passion," "emotion," "meditation," and "superhuman power" (Monier-Williams 1993: 754). *Bhāva*, often translated as "mood," and viewed as a vehicle of religious expression, is a state of intense spiritual rapture including visions and mystical union with the deity. It is manifested externally as trances and ecstatic states, usually expressed through words, gestures, facial expressions, and emotions. In *bhāva*, the divine is believed to express itself through the guru's body. As the famous male guru from Andhra Pradesh Shiva Bala Yogi (1935–1994) understands it, the phenomenon of *bhāva* usually occurs "when the astral bodies of divine beings manifest within [one's own] being."[259]

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[259] http://www.shiva.org/BhavaSamadhi.htm
The term "astral body" is borrowed from theosophical terminology.

The phenomenon of *bhāva* is closely associated with the issue of ecstasy, and in a monograph exploring "divine madness" in West Bengal, June McDaniel differentiates ritualized ecstasy from spontaneous ecstasy. According to her, ritualized ecstasy is a "regulated behavior," induced by following a specific religious tradition and practices, authoritative texts, and lineage (McDaniel 1989: 19). It is characterized by self-control and obedience, avoiding the display of *siddhis*, and ritual worship and practices. That kind of ecstasy is acquired through one's own will and is similar among different practitioners following identical religious paths.

Spontaneous ecstasy, on the contrary, is more spectacular and refers to states of trance or possession occurring spontaneously and unexpectedly in meditation or in ordinary situations such as eating or working. Its expression differs from person to person, and is characterized by an irrational and uncontrollable behavior (McDaniel 1989: 19). This might include incoherent speech, involuntary cessation of breath, crying, and trembling. It "creates an inner pressure which must be released," identified by Lisa Lassell Hallstrom as *kriyās* or involuntary yogic activities believed to be produced when the purification of the subtle body takes place (McDaniel 1989: 200; Lassell Hallstrom 1999: 109). There is no volition involved in spontaneous ecstasy which tends to disappear if controlled (McDaniel 1989: 200). There is no acting of roles, as in a drama, but rather a "play" (*līlā*) of gods or goddesses through the body, understood as an expression of "spontaneous upsurges of divine will (*kheyāla*)" (McDaniel 1989: 199). According to Kathleen Erndl, the terms *līlā*, *khel* ("play"), or *kalā* ("art" or "fabrication") are interchangeable in Bengali contexts, and refer to "the Goddess's exuberant but seemingly (to humans) purposeless creativity" (Erndl 1993: 108).

McDaniel considers *bhāvas* to be the major criterion legitimating Bengali female saints' and holy women's religious status (McDaniel 1989: 231). The chief inspirers and models of this tradition are Caitanya (1486–1533) and Ramakrishna (1836–1886). Both had intense *bhāva*-experiences which they manifested in an utmost unconventional way. *Bhāva* as "divine mood" or "aspect" of the guru or God should not be confused with the devotee's *bhāvas*, referring to relationships or

emotional attitudes towards the guru or the deity in devotional and *vaiṣṇava*-influenced religious contexts.[260]

McDaniel's notions of "divine madness" and spontaneous ecstasy are closely related to issues of ritual possession. In his diachronic study on possession in South Asia, Frederick M. Smith claims that *āveśa*, literally "entrance into," is perhaps the most widely used term for possession. Closely related to the term *āveśa* is the word *praveśa* "entrance toward." According to Smith, while *āveśa* refers to benign, self-motivated possession, *praveśa* refers to possession originating from outside. Smith qualifies involuntary possession as "bad" as it is believed to be induced by a malevolent being (*bhūta*). In contrast, voluntary possession is considered "good" as it is believed to be induced by a deity (Smith 2006: 14).

Another central notion related to possession is the term *graha*. *Graha* is understood as an "entity," characterized by its ability to "grasp," "seize," or "hold" its victim (Smith 2006: 14). A *graha* is considered a malefic entity "taking control of the sense organs and sensory functions of the individual" independently of the possessed person's will (Smith 2006: 484; 14). Whereas the term *graha* has been given various interpretations in different texts, what is interesting for my study is that this form of possession relates to a state where a person's individuality is believed to be temporarily "grasped" or "held", either by a higher power or a negative "entity."

The term *āveśa* is closely related to *bhāva* in what Smith calls "devotional possession" which is particularly prominent in *bhakti* literature.[261] It is defined as a state of absorption, "in which the devotee partakes of the nature of the deity, in terms akin to possession, including entry, immersion, ecstasy, insanity, and loss of consciousness" (Smith 2006: 355). Smith distinguishes between *bhakti*-induced *bhāva* and *bhakti*-induced *āveśa*. Referring to the Bhramara-Gītā of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, Smith suggests that *āveśa* can be threatening: "In *bhakti*-induced *āveśa*, the very self-identity of the experiencer is reconstituted by the Lord's presence and bliss as the devotee 'comes to' the

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[260] These relationships or *sthāyi-bhāva* (i.e. strong personal "moods" of devotees towards the *guru* or the deity) are the followings: *śānta-bhāva, dāsya-bhāva, sākhya-bhāva, vātsālya-bhāva,* and *mādhurya-* or *śṛṅgāra-bhāva* (Dimock 1991: 22–23).

[261] See Frederick M. Smith's ninth chapter, "Devotion as Possession" in *The Self Possessed: Deity and Spirit Possession in South Asian Literature and Civilization*, New York 2006, 345–362.

Lord." In contrast, "*bhakti*-induced *bhāva* […] is a mood that allows the devotee to experience grace, in this case, Kṛṣṇa's, while not necessarily entering into the creative forces (*līlā*) that inhere in that grace" (Smith 2006: 355). As far as I am aware, while *bhakti*-induced *bhāva* shows some similarity with McDaniel's notion of ritualized ecstasy, *bhakti*-induced *āveśa* is reminiscent of McDaniel's views of spontaneous ecstasy. Ritualized *āveśa* is also a central element in Tantric cult.

One example of what McDaniel calls "spontaneous" and "ritualized" ecstasy is portrayed in the French anthropologist Catherine Clémentin-Ojha's study of Shobha Ma (1921–) from Varanasi. During her early career, Shobha Ma had numerous visions of Kṛṣṇa and Kālī. When the deities pervaded her consciousness during the *bhāva* states, she identified completely with them and automatically "exteriorized" or "actualized" these deities through spontaneous *mudrās*, thus making these visions available to her audience (Clémentin-Ojha 1990: 66). Nowadays, Shobha Ma regularly displays different roles reflecting different aspects of her personality during a two-hour ritual taking place twice a year, in which she becomes in turn Kṛṣṇa as flute player, Kālī with a lolling tongue, the goddess displaying a protective *mudrā*, and a guru distributing her blessings (Clémentin-Ojha 1990: 165).

Another example of spiritual ecstasy is mentioned by Madhu Khanna, scholar and follower of Madhobi Ma presented in Chapter II. Khanna gives a dramatic account of her guru when manifesting the *svarūpa* or "own form" of Tārā, a Bengali form of the goddess Kālī, during a ritual called *Tārā Bhāva*. Some years ago, these rituals used to take place nearly twice a week over a period of nearly three months (Khanna 2002b: 150).

> One day in the evening while we sat chanting the name of goddess during a *kirtan*, Ma fell into a deep trance. Her head began to sway gently and her body moved round and round in rhythm with the holy chant – a sign to indicate that the goddess Tārā in her energy body (*Śakti-svarūpa*) had entered her body and had begun to conduct her movements. Ma's eyes were shut and her lips bore a benign look. Slowly and suddenly, the corners of her mouth got stained with a red blood-like substance and the liquid began to stain her mouth. Ma tightened her lips and gave an ecstatic smile. Slowly, the ruddy liquid was

> over-flowing from her mouth. She then opened her mouth wide, and out came her lolling blood-stained tongue. Here was a human icon of goddess Tārā, her live incarnation embodying her most important attributes in physical form. Soon her right hand rose up and her fingers curled into the goad posture (*ankuśa-mudrā*). After a while her left hand was poised in the gesture of fearlessness (*abhaya-mudrā*), then the latter changed to the boon-bestowing posture. (Khanna 2002b: 149)

According to Khanna's devotee, the goddess might descend into chosen human beings on special occasions such as when entering a temple, burning incense, singing a holy name, or during festivals (Khanna 2002b: 149). Khanna adds: "This is the way in which the great goddess grants a beatific vision to her devotees: through a direct one-to-one communication, without the intervention of another person" (Khanna 2002b: 148).[262]

In a similar way, the hagiography of Sai Rajarajeshwari, portrayed in Chapter II, gives an account of a trancelike state which can be understood as an expression of spontaneous ecstasy. The authors of *SSRS* record that one evening, during *āratī* at *Prashanti Nilayam*, Sathya Sai Baba's *āśram*, Sai Rajarajeshwari's body suddenly changed its appearance and turned black. It is said that "the fury of the enraged Devi form latent in Lalitha emerged and flowed towards Swamy. Her fury intensified to such an extent that She wanted to destroy creation itself!" (*SSRS* 1999: 191). That way of acting was interpreted as an expression of Mahākālī's *līlā*. Sai Rajarajeshwari's *bhāva* state that evening only lasted a very short time, however, as it is said that her dark complexion was sucked away by Sathya Sai Baba. The hagiography recounts that, as a result, Sathya Sai Baba' own complexion turned black (*SSRS* 1999: 191).

One example of what I understand to be ritualized ecstasy is reported in the same hagiography where it is said that once a year, on the occasion of the ten-day Dussera or Vijayadashami festival, Sai Rajarajeshwari manifests different aspects of the goddess Camuṇḍī as Mahiṣāsurasamardinī, ("she who slays the demon Mahiṣāsura"), through dance and *mudrās* representing weapons (*āyudhas*) (*SSRS*

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[262] In my own opinion, however, such a phenomenon seems rather to be related to *āveśa* than to *bhāva*.

1999: 282–283). According to the compilers of her hagiography (*SSRS*) and like what most gurus claim, Sai Rajarajeshwari's moods are never understood as *parakāyaprāveśa*, an Indian practice of ritual possession where the spirit is believed to temporarily enter the body of the person possessed. Nor are they viewed as a manifestation of ritualized ecstasy but instead as proof that Sai Rajarajeshwari is permanently established in the divine, thus suggesting that she is a true, enlightened mystic (*SSRS* 1999: 33).

One person known for her particularly intense *bhāva* states is Amritanandamayi. Throughout her childhood and adolescence, she displayed numerous expressions of spontaneous ecstasy reminiscent of a ritually possessed person's behavior. These *bhāvas* culminated at the end of her teens when her identification with Kṛṣṇa and Devī is said to have been so total that she started spontaneously manifesting their forms. Nowadays, one of the characteristics of Amritanandamayi's cult is the regularly occurring event called *Devī Bhāva dārśan*, literally "the seeing of the divine moods of the great Goddess." During this highly ritualized *dārśan*, Amritanadamayi manifests Devī, or the great goddess, thus "revealing" a glimpse of her divinity to the audience. In the following, I intend to give an account of this ritual which I have witnessed several times in different countries.

The very last day of Amritanandamayi's visit to any city, or twice a week in Amritapuri, time is usually set aside for *Devī Bhāva dārśan*.[263] On these occasions, Amritanandamayi does not wear the simple white sari of the *brahmacāriṇī* as she usually does. Instead, she is dressed in a colored silk sari with a flower garland around her neck. Her hair hangs loose, she has a silver tiara on her forehead, and she is believed to embody Devī, the great goddess. The ceremony starts around 6 p.m. when a disciple of Amritanandamayi performs *āratī*, a ritual offering of light, waving a multi-wick oil lamp in a circle before her, accompanied by *bhājans* invoking the goddess Devī.

Like regular *dārśans*, the *Devī Bhāva dārśan* following the *āratī* is characterized by the hugging of people. It usually continues throughout the night, not unusually between five to nine o'clock the following morning, and occasionally even until 12:00 noon, depending on the

[263] *Devī Bhāva* which used to take place three times a week was reduced to twice a week a few years ago because of Amritanandamayi's increasing neck problems caused by the hugging.

number of participants on that particular occasion. Amritanandamayi hugs, whispers, hugs again with great patience and compassion until every single person has received her blessing. When I participated in such a *dārśan* in India on December 31, 2000, Amma started at 5 p.m. and was finished the next morning at 9 a.m., and followers told me that she had hugged twelve thousand people during that single night.[264]

The *Devī Bhāva dārśan* reaches its climax when the last devotee has received her embrace and Amritanandamayi finally rises from her seat. Throughout the night, I did not see her leave her chair, not even for five minutes, and one wonders how she can stand up at all, having spent sixteen hours on her seat. She stands on the stage for a while, moving her head slowly in order to let her gaze sweep across all the gathered devotees, as in a final collective embrace, holding in her hands flower petals that have been collected by her attendants. While the *bhajans* reach a crescendo, she starts showering the flower petals over the audience. This is a great long-waited moment for the devotees, when Devī personified stands before them in all her glory, showering upon them her divine grace in the form of fragrant flower petals. After about fifteen minutes, the *bhajans* stop and the *dārśan* is over.

Devotees understand *Devī Bhāva dārśans* as blessed moments when Amritanandamayi "unveils" her true self as a goddess in order to give them a glimpse of her supreme divinity. In doing so, she makes tangible for people what is otherwise "transcendental and abstract", and thus helps them "approach God" and make sense of the divine (Warrier 2000: 49). It also helps people, especially the "ignorant", to come to spirituality and make their faith stronger. "Some are interested only if they see Mother in the costume of Devi or Krishna […] Some people find it difficult to believe Mother's words during ordinary times, but if Mother say the same thing during the Devi Bhāva, they will believe" (*Awaken Children!* 1990, vol.II: 105).

In Amritanandamayi's biography, *svāmī* Amritaswarupananda explains *Devī bhāva dārśan* as follows:

> *Bhava Darshan* is the manifestation of different *Isvara Bhavas* or Divine Moods by an Incarnation of God according to the wishes of the devotees. […] These *Bhavas* mani-

[264] Interview with Swami Krishnamritaprana in Amritapuri (Kerala), 13.12.1999.

> fested by Incarnations [take] place only on certain occasions to fulfill a particular end, especially in response to the ardent desire of their devotees. Moreover, they […] last only for a short time. The Holy Mother Amritanandamayi manifests the Divine Moods three nights a week lasting for long periods of 10 to 12 hours depending upon the number of devotees present for *Darshan*. This is the Holy Mother's way of serving humanity, plunged as it is in the deep quagmire of worldliness.
>
> During the Holy Mother's […] Devi *Bhavas*, She brings out That which is within Her […] in order to bless Her devotees. The Holy Mother once said regarding the *Bhavas*: "Mother is not manifesting even an infinitesimal part of Her spiritual power during the *Bhavas*. If it were to be manifested as it is, no one could come near!" She continues, "All the deities of the Hindu pantheon, who represent the numberless aspects of One Supreme Being, exist within us. A Divine Incarnation can manifest any of them by mere will for the good of the world. […] *Devi Bhava* is the manifestation of the Eternal Feminine, the Creatrix, the active principle of the Impersonal Absolute. (Swami Amritaswarupananda 1994: 210 – 211)

Ritualized ecstasy can be interpreted from the sociopsychological framework of role theory developed by Hjalmar Sundén. According to Sundén, when a religion becomes formalized, it tends to create a set of mythological accounts and religious patterns (attitudes, values, or behaviors) in relation to the divine, labeled as a "role" and tends to invest that role with a particular status (Sundén 1959: 52). A person might "take over" that highly valued role including behavior, voice, words, and gestures through "identification" and eventually internalize that role (Sundén 1959: 56). While a person can not display different roles and degrees of status simultaneously, he or she can alternate freely between them (Sundén 1959: 52). This entails, among other things, that a person might be the divine on certain occasions, and the worshiper of the divine in others, thus alternating between the role of God, and the role of the human counterpart of God. Role taking through identification with and internalization of a God or a Goddess is at the very core of the female guru's spiritual life and my material

provides several examples illustrating that such role taking characterizes ritualized ecstasy.

I have discussed Amritanandamayi's *Devī bhāva dārśan* with *svāminī* Krishnamritaprana. While she strongly believes that gods and goddesses are present in every human being, *svāminī* Krishnamritaprana states that only a realized soul, someone who has become one with God, can take on any divine personality, totally become one with it, and then manifest it outwardly to people. According to her, during the *Devī bhāva dārśan*, what Amritanandamayi manifests is not any specific goddess but different aspects of the divine, and she concentrates more specifically on *paraśakti*, the female aspect of the Divine Mother, becoming one with it, and showing it externally to people.[265]

Similarly to what *svāmī* Amritaswarupananda stated above, *svāminī* Krishnamritaprana claims that the reason why Amritanandamayi originally started to perform the *Devī bhāva dārśan* ritual is that she wanted to make the divine tangible to people. At that time, the local inhabitants of the fishing village close to Amritapuri where she lives were not very well educated. They used to worship gods and goddesses in a superstitious way, asking for blessings from the Gods for sick cows, hens not laying any eggs, or a daughter's marriage. That is the reason why Amritanandamayi decided to take on the forms of Kṛṣṇa or Devī. She wanted to show these forms to the people in order to bless them and strengthen their faith in God. Moreover, that was the only way the local inhabitants could be made to understand. *Svāminī* Krishnamritaprana claims that nowadays such a ritual is no longer needed as much, because most people coming to Amritanandamayi are interested in spirituality and spiritual teachings. Nevertheless, Amritanandamayi still continues to bless the people with the *Devī bhāva dārśan*.[266]

Although Shobha Ma, Madhobi Ma, Sai Rajarajeshwari, and Amritanandamayi's *bhāva* states resemble each other in many respects, they also differ in terms of outer expression, intensity, and interpretation. Amritanandamayi's displaying of "*bhāvas*" during the *Devī bhāva dārśan* occurs in a controlled manner and appears to be induced at will, thus suggesting that it is a case of what McDaniel calls "ritua-

265 Interview with Swami Krishnamritaprana in Amritapuri (Kerala), 13.12.1999.

266 Interview with Swami Krishnamritaprana in Amritapuri (Kerala), 13.12.1999.

lized ecstasy." It does not take dramatic forms of expression as in the cases of Madhobi Ma and Sai Rajarajeshwari. It is only Amritanandamayi's outer appearance – dressing in a colored silk sari instead of the white one she otherwise wears, her hair hanging loosely instead of tied in her usual bun, and the silver tiara on her forehead – that suggests that she has "taken over" the role of Devī.

In contrast, Shobha Ma's displaying of *bhāvas* during the first years of her spiritual career appeared to be more dramatic, as a "dramatization close to the one observed in certain cases of possession" Clémentin-Ojha 1990: 66).[267] Shobha Ma's current *bhāva* states differ, however, from the expressions of spontaneous ecstasy she used to display in her teens, and nowadays, her cult looks more like a staged drama. The curtain opening in front of her at the beginning of the ceremony, her choice of clothes and make-up, suggest a cult deliberately ritualized. Moreover, given that *bhāvas* now take place twice a year, in a certain place, and at a certain time chosen in advance, they tend to be "regulated" and institutionalized (Clémentin-Ojha 1990: 163). Clémentin-Ojha claims that contrary to ordinary possession, there is identification with divine models in Shobha Ma's case (Clémentin-Ojha 1990: 66–67). Shobha Ma's displaying of *bhāvas* twice a year is, however, interpreted differently by her disciples. These strongly believe that on these occasions, Shobha Ma leaves her ordinary personality behind as soon as she enters the prayer hall and becomes divine instantaneously (Clémentin-Ojha 1990: 163).

Looking at Shobha Ma's cult, Clémentin-Ojha draws the conclusion that it has been subjected to an inversion. Whereas it previously arose because of Shobha Ma's spontaneous *bhāvas*, it seems now that it is the cult itself that induces a trancelike behavior (Clémentin-Ojha 1990: 163). According to Clémentin-Ojha, Shobha Ma's cult is modeled on *mūrti* worship where devotees invoke the divinity, calling on it to "descend" into icons. In Shobha Ma's case, the divinity "descends" into a human body and her displaying of *mudrās* gives legitimacy to her spiritual achievements. It is viewed as a proof that she leaves her ordinary state of consciousness in order to get access to a divine realm (Clémentin-Ojha 1990: 163–164).

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267 My translation, p. 66.

Contrary to Clémentin-Ojha's view, however, Madhu Khanna interprets Madhobi Ma's deep trancelike states as "divine possession," despite the fact that Madhobi Ma's trance states seem to be regulated; they usually occur regularly during a period of three months and contain standard Hindu ingredients such as the displaying of well-known *mudrās*. That state of "divine possession" is, however, never considered as something negative. As Khanna puts it, "The incarnatory possession of the goddesses is never looked upon as an affliction but as a form of divine grace" (Khanna 2002b: 148). Similarly to what Amritanandamayi's followers said, Khanna claims that such an expression of ritual ecstasy is the most direct way in which the divine might be recognized. It is also important, as it strengthens the faith of devotees (Khanna 2002b: 148–150). As far as I am aware, Clémentin-Ojha's and Khanna's respective interpretations of Shobha Ma's and Madhobi Ma's rituals are closely related to the issue of devotional possession presented above in what Frederick M. Smith calls *bhakti*-induced *āveśa*, i.e., *bhakti*-induced *bhāva* (Smith 2006: 355).

Khanna does not mention the term *bhāva*, used in most hagiographies, but speaks instead of the goddess's *līlā*, or "divine sport," in which the goddess "chooses special persons as her emissaries on the earth" (Khanna 2002b: 148). Similarly, I have not been able to find the word *bhāva* in Sai Rajarajeshwari's hagiography, but the term *līlā* is frequently mentioned. That might be explained by Erndl's claim that "There is considerable variety in possession experiences, in their intensity, duration, and frequency. There is also considerable variation in the degree of recognition, respect, and encouragement given to possession vehicles by other members of society" (Erndl 1993: 109).

This variety of *bhāva* experiences might also be labeled and understood in multiple ways according to the devotional regional contexts where such religious expressions are found. These are not only specifically present among *vaiṣṇavas*, *śāktas*, and Bāuls of Bengal, but also among Āḻvārs and Nāyaṇārs of South India, as well as Marathī saints (McDaniel 1989: 7). They are also reflected in the examples presented above, showing that the women are familiar with devotional *śākta* traditions. Both Madhobi Ma and Shobha Ma originally belonged to a *śākta* Bengali context, and Sai Rajarajeshwari is part of the South Indian *śākta* environment.

According to my own observations from studying multiple hagiographies of female gurus, spontaneous ecstasy, displayed from time to time by some women, seems to characterize women's religiosity in their early years. Moreover, in most cases, it is more anecdotal than prominent. As mentioned earlier, ecstatic states are not often referred to as "possession" by gurus or followers. This might be due to the fact that they want to dissociate themselves from what is believed to be "lower" forms of spiritual ecstasy, usually associated with the religiosity of members of lower *varṇas*.

## 5. Female *avatārs*

In terms that echo Kṛṣṇa's words in the Bhagavadgītā, Devī, the goddess of the *śākta* text Devī-Gītā declares: "Whenever there is a decline in righteousness, O Mountain, And a rising up of unrighteousness, then I assume various guises", (9.22–23) (Mackenzie Brown 1998: 271). Similarly to the message of the Devī-Gītā, a few women in the present study have chosen to "reveal" their "true" identity as a divine incarnation or manifestation of the divine to their followers. In Hindu tradition, there are two different views on how divinity can be realized in a human body. One is the belief that a human being can attain spiritual perfection through *sādhana* based on spiritual practices, in other words, through one's own efforts. This is, for example, the case for *siddhas* ("perfected ones") or *sadgurus* ("true, real gurus"), known for having achieved a high level of spiritual attainment (enlightenment) after years of spiritual practices. The second is the belief that from time to time, the Godhead descends to earth in human form as an *avatār*. *Avatārs* are not believed to have gained their divinity through their own merits but by birth.

One person who chose to "unveil" her so-called divine nature is Sai Rajarajeshwari, portrayed in Chapter II. In 1997, on the occasion of her fiftieth birthday and the inauguration of the *Srimad Sai Rajarajeshwari Trust*, she was asked to reveal what she calls her true identity as goddess and *avatār* by Sathya Sai Baba, for the benefit of humanity. The announcement is said to have been a product of Sathya Sai Baba's *saṅkalpa* or own determination in line with specific vows (*SSRS* 1999: 333). On that day, Sai Rajarajeshwari made the following declaration:

> In this Kaliyuga, many people question whether God has taken Avatar or whether He will take Avatar. Sri Krishna has announced in the Bhagwad Gita that whenever Dharma and Sathya lose their very basis, when obstacles arise in their adherence, Avatars will manifest on earth. Accordingly, every now and then Avatars appear on earth. When Avatars manifest on earth, they help man to recognize God in every living being. On this auspicious day, I would like to make my true form known to all. It is alright if you understand this, it is alright even if you don't; it does not matter if you recognize me, it does not matter even if you do not. Today, on this auspicious day, I will Myself lift my veil of Maya and proclaim that I am the (Sri Chakra) Binduvasini, Srimad Rajarajeshwari. (*SSRS* 1999: 330-331)[268]

Sai Rajarajeshwari's announcement on her birthday is an assessment of her supreme divinity, both as *avatār* and goddess. In another excerpt of the same declaration, she says in a grandiose manner: "May the entire world, may my entire creation be uplifted" (*SSRS* 1999: 331), thus displaying the omnipotent character of her divinity. Since her announcement on her birthday, Sai Rajarajeshwari is no longer believed to be an ordinary housewife but an extraordinary being or divine incarnation. She claims to have received the revelation that Sathya Sai Baba was her husband in a previous incarnation. While Sathya Sai Baba is regarded as the embodiment of the Śiva-Śakti principle of the *kaliyuga*, in her present incarnation, Sai Rajarajeshwari is viewed as Śakti (*SSRS* 1999: 14).

Sai Rajarajeshwari's birthday announcement resembles another announcement made by the founder of *Sahaja Yoga*, Mataji Nirmala Devi (1923–) from Maharashtra. In a declaration made on December 2, 1979, in London, Nirmala Devi revealed her divinity to her followers as follows:

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[268] cf. Sathya Sai Baba's words written down by Tal Brooke, a former disciple: "I am God…I am a Divine Incarnation, the same as Ram, Krishna or Christ. I am the Avatar. Simple as that" […] "My power is divine and has no limit. I have the power to change the earth into sky and the sky into earth, but I don't because there is no reason to do it... I am beyond any obstacles and there is no force, natural or supernatural, that can stop me or my mission" (Tal Brooke 1976: 67–68).

> [Today] is the day "I" declare that "I" am the One who has to save the humanity. "I" declare, "I" am the one who is *Adi Shakti*, who is the Mother of all the mothers, who is the *Primordial Mother*, the *Shakti*, the purest desire of God, who has incarnated on this earth to give meaning to itself, to this creation, to human beings; and "I" am sure that through "My" Love and patience and through "My" powers "I" am going to achieve it. (Coney 1999: 27)[269]

Like Nirmala Devi, Sai Rajarajeshwari is regarded as *paraśakti*, or supreme energy, and as such, is believed to be the source of all creation. In conformity with the *avatāra* concept, the compilers of her hagiography (*SSRS*) claim that she has not taken birth to do *sādhana* for the sake of liberation from future births, nor is her birth due to her karmas in past births, or to detach herself from karmic bondage. She is instead believed to be "the original *śakti* form", having the innate power to liberate mankind (*SSRS* 1999: 84). Her real identity is said to be hidden by the veil of *māyā* or "illusion," which according to Hindu belief keeps mankind bound to *saṃsāra*, the wheel of existences. Accordingly, Sai Rajarajeshwari is sometimes identified with the goddess Mahamāyā (*SSRS* 1999: 84).[270] The only person able to remove this veil from her is believed to be God himself, here understood as Sathya Sai Baba, and this is what he did in 1995 when he thought that the opportune time had arrived. According to the hagiography, the only reason why Sai Rajarajeshwari has taken birth is to act as a model in order to liberate mankind (*SSRS* 1999: 84).

Given that ideally, one of the main virtues of a guru is humility, such announcements might appear out of place to a western audience. In 2001, I met Narayani Amma, a young man from Tamil Nadu born in 1976. Narayani Amma is a spiritual leader who claims to be the incarnation of the goddess Nārāyanī, a manifestation of Durgā, Lakṣmī, and Sarasvatī. During a private *darśan*, I asked him the fol-

[269] cf. Anandamayi Ma. During her life, Anandamayi Ma took a vow of silence for a period of three years. Once, when she was in a trance state, one of her disciples heard her utter the following sentences in a language resembling Sanskrit: "By Me alone are all created in My own image; by Me are all sent into this world and in Me all find final refuge. I am the final cause indicated by the Praṇava in the Vedas. I am Mahāmāyā and Mahābhāva all in one. Devotion to Me is the cause of *mokṣa*. All are mine" (McDaniel 1989: 197).

[270] The goddess Mahamāyā is mainly known from the Kālīkā Pūraṇa in which she is the central deity.

lowing question: “Is not such a presumption a play of your *ego*?” He answered that the reason why he had to reveal his divinity was to convince people to come to faith. He strongly believed that waiting for recognition would be too time consuming, especially with people coming from rural areas.[271] As with Amritanandamayi’s godly appearance at *Devī Bhāva darśans*, which aims to induce faith in believers, Narayani Amma’s answer suggests that “revealing” one’s divinity as a great goddess in such a way is such an integral part of the Hindu mythological framework that it makes sense to potential Indian believers.

As far as I am aware, Sai Rajarajeshwari’s and Nirmala Devi’s announcements are modeled on a statement made in the Devīmāhātmyam where the goddess Devī glorifies her own cosmic status and salvific activities. They are also modeled on the Devī-Gītā, a didactic discourse in the form of dialogues in which the supreme truth is revealed directly by the female deity while unveiling her inherent nature as divine. In the Devī-Gītā, the revelation takes two main forms: *upadeśa* or personal instruction, and *darśana* or manifestation of her cosmic form (*rūpa*). In both texts, the goddess is believed to be the supreme cause of creation, thus challenging masculine interpretations of the cosmic process (Mackenzie Brown 1990: 180–182).

Sai Rajarajeshwari’s announcement on her birthday also links up with the South Indian religious tradition of Śrīvidyā *tantra*. Śrīvidyā *tantra* emphasizes the supremacy of Lalitā Tripurasundarī, also called Rājarājeśvarī or “Queen of Kings,” as the red goddess and principal deity. Lalitā Tripurasundarī is believed, among other things, to be the *binduvasinī*, i.e., the “resident” (*vāsinī*) of the *bindu* (“drop,” “central point”) of the *śrīcakra*. The *śrīcakra*, also called *śrīyantra*, is a widespread and well-known diagram used in *śākta* worship. Theologically, the *śrīcakra* (literally “the wheel of Śrī”) symbolizes the transcendent aspect of the goddess, and the central point (*bindu*) is considered as the undifferentiated divinity, the source of all creation before duality arises (Brooks 1992: 115–116). Douglas Renfrew Brooks claims that “The *śrīcakra* represents the process by which the originally unified, undifferentiated divinity assumes the binary character of the masculine and feminine Śiva and Śakti, and creates the universe through an

[271] Field notes, Thirumalaikodi (Tamil Nadu), 26.1.2001.

on-going process of devolving particularization (*kalā*)" (Brooks 1992: 115).

## 6. Disciples' and gurus' perceptions of the sacred feminine in a human body, and the meanings of Indian goddess symbolism

In my interaction with followers, I have met numerous people who claim to have spiritual experiences while interacting with their spiritual master. For followers, there is no doubt that gurus are incarnations of the divine. A male devotee from West Bengal named "Shyama" was hospitalized in January 1980 after a heart attack. He describes his first encounter with Madhobi Ma, portrayed in Chapter II, in a dream:

> In my dream came a radiant Sanyasini [sic!] overflowing with motherly love who uttered in her heavenly sweet voice, "Shyama be fearless, I am standing at the door step of your life, and nobody has the power to take away my son Shyama." Like this two days went and on the third day blessing of my dreamt goddess mother put me on the path of recovery. After that my mind always cried trying to find out and understand who is this sanyasini of my dream and I engaged myself in Gita path. Like this life went on till May. Suddenly one day I again saw in my dream the image of that goddess who came in my dream and said, "Shyama I am your mother, my name is Maa-Madhobi, look inside the 'Panjika' ('panchang' – the annual astrological directory) and you will find my address Shyama." I found the address and wrote to affectionate mother, reply came. (Swami Sidheshwarananda 1991: 52-53)

Referring to Amritanandamayi's ritual embrace, Roxanne Reed, a fifty-five-year-old flight attendant who has been a disciple for fourteen years says: "I think she's a saint on Earth. […] I can't describe it. […] You just feel like you've been touched by God" (Lebovich 2004).[272]

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[272] Lebovich, Jennifer, "Thousands wait hours for a hug: crowd down to Amma's open arms at Manhattan Center," *City News*, 19.7.2004.
http://www.amritapuri.org/media/usa/nydaily2004.php

The divine character attributed to Amritanandamayi is also reflected in Timothy Conway's following comment: "Just her stamina – embracing these millions of people one by one, day after day, without a break, all over the world – is some kind of divine gift. No mere human resources could accomplish this."[273]

In all the stories about Sai Rajarajeshwari, portrayed in Chapter II, and in my interaction with her followers, what appeared most characteristic and most appealing to devotees is a strong belief that she is an *avatār* and goddess. Maitreyi, a twenty-two-year-old girl performing full-time service in the bookshop of the Trust located at the guru's residence, told me that Sai Rajarajeshwari differs greatly from other spiritual masters because she was born enlightened and born a goddess. Maitreyi does not consider her guru to be a perfected being who has ennobled herself through spiritual practices or *sādhana*. Instead, she claims that she was already divine and perfect at birth. To Maitreyi, Sai Rajarajeshwari surpasses all other spiritual masters, and comparing her with other gurus makes no sense, a view that is echoed by her other followers.[274] When I presented my research project to a female German disciple, one of the few people who have been allowed to live permanently in the guru's *āśram*, she exclaimed, quite chocked: "Amma is not a guru, she is not a goddess, she is *The Goddess*!"[275]

Whereas most female gurus are revered and worshiped as goddesses, and whereas gurus such as Amritanandamayi, Sai Rajarajeshwari, and Madhobi Ma do choose to display the role and attributes of the goddess through *bhāvas* on certain occasions, the question to consider is how female spiritual masters perceive their identity and role as living divinity. In other words, do they believe themselves to be divine incarnations? That question is closely related to the issue of goddess symbolism and its meanings.

As mentioned in the introduction, symbols are not clear, definite, and consistent entities, but are the products of people's projections. As such, they can be selected, interpreted, and used in different ways, at different times, and for different purposes (Turner 1974: 19–20). Among the women in the present study, there is evidence that gurus

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273 http://www.amma.org/amma/meeting-amma.html

274 Field notes, Mysore (Karnataka), 2.2.2006.

275 Field notes, Karekura (Karnataka), 31.1. 2006. The disciple's emphasis.

create and interpret symbols in ways that suit them, thus making use of "positive" self-representations. As manifestations of the goddess, most of the women studied are believed to represent the ultimate reality transcending all forms of duality.

They are considered benevolent, bestowing wealth and health. They are understood as *ādiparaśakti*, or primordial energy, and as such are associated with the creative and life-giving aspect of the goddess, and with inner qualities such as strength and wisdom. Most of them are identified with powerful deities such as Devī, Sarasvatī, Lakṣmī, Parvatī, Tārā, Kālī, or Rājārajeśvarī, and it is noteworthy that I have not been able to find a single guru called Sītā, a goddess symbolizing the faithful wife. While motherly aspects of women as life-giving beings are central in accounts of female gurus, suggested, among other things, by the way they are addressed (Mā, Mātā, Mātajī, Ammā), features indicating female submission are conspicuous by their absence.

Although all the followers, as far as I am aware, identify their gurus with the divine, the gurus themselves may see things differently. My survey suggests that while a few gurus claim to be godly incarnations, most do not. In the previous section of the present chapter, I gave a brief account of Sai Rajarajeshwari's and Nirmala Devi's public "revelations" of their identity as goddesses. An investigation of their life-stories indicates that all specific events happening throughout their lives have systematically been interpreted in light of what is understood as a divine mission, and a role as saviour chosen by God to rescue mankind.

What Sai Rajarajeshwari and Nirmala Devi are keen to emphasize in their self-representations is their omniscient and omnipotent character and their extraordinary or supra-human abilities. Through their exceptional announcements, they position themselves as exceptional beings, or women apart from the ordinary. In other words, both women have demonstrably been skillful at convincing potential followers of the exclusivity of their holiness and divine mission, given that their claims have been heard and recognized by the members of their community. By proclaiming their identification with the goddess, they can never be equated with ordinary human beings, thus making their supremacy unchallenged.

Whereas guruhood is interpreted from that idealized perspective by a few female gurus, it is interesting to see that others oppose that

image. When a person asked Mother Meera (1960–): "During *Darshan*, people kneel down before you. How do you feel about it?" she answered "For me that has no special importance. People come because of their need. If they have devotion in their life, I receive it with tenderness and love" (Mother Meera 1997, Part II: 40). Amritanandamayi's answer to a journalist telling her that people believe her to be an *avatār* of the goddess Durgā was as follows: "That's what people say. That's their belief. I don't worry too much about these things. To Amma, love is more important. What people say, or think of me, that is theirs to hold. I do not want to worry about it. Today they may call me good, tomorrow they may call me the devil" (*The Rediff Interview*, 2.8.2002).[276]

In a similar way, while most of Shree Maa's devotees consider their guru to be an incarnation of Sharada Devi, Ramakrishna's wife, Shree Maa usually replies: "All of us are incarnations of God." However, her answer does not convince her devotees who believe that because their guru speaks with such a conviction, there is no doubt that she is conveying first-hand spiritual experiences (Satyananda Saraswati 1997: 89). Anasuya Devi is another person who was understood as an embodiment of the goddess by her followers. Although she often maintained that she was not different from ordinary people, from time to time, it happened that she spontaneously made *mudrā*-gestures and gazed into infinity. For followers, that unusual behavior was convincing enough to legitimize her divine nature (Conway 1994: 196).

From time to time, Shakti Devi, presented in Chapter II, receives devotees who wish to worship her as a living goddess. One evening during my stay with her, a well-educated follower visited her unexpectedly and performed a relatively elaborate *pādapūjā* for her.[277] He had brought brass vessels such as pots, plates, and a tray, a garland of flower, rose petals, turmeric, and *kuṅkum*, and Shakti Devi embraced her role as goddess with great ease and assurance. In the final part of the ritual, the devotee garlanded her neck and put a pink lotus flower

[276] http://www.amritapuri.org/media/india/rediff0207.htm (*The Rediff Interview with Mata Amritanandamayi*, 2.8.2002).

[277] *Pādapūjā* or "worship of the feet" of the deity or the guru is a widespread spiritual practice in India. Shakti Devi claims that one reason for the sacredness of the feet, with the exception of esoteric, mythological, and religious explanations, is a scientific one. Hands, feet, and the top of the head are believed to be particularly charged with energy.

in her right hand, hence suggesting her identification with Lakṣmī, the Goddess of wealth and abundance.[278]

When I asked Shakti Devi how she feels about such signs of deference and being worshiped as the embodiment of the sacred feminine, she answered that she does not herself believe to be a divine incarnation. Instead, she believes that she is an instrument, and that the goddess is working through her. She says she understands why her devotees perform *pādapūjā* for her, but that as far as she is concerned, she rather views the ceremony as a mark of respect for all goddesses in general. Shakti Devi claims that when people compare themselves with her, she might be understood as a goddess. When she compares herself with the Goddess, however, she believes she still has much to improve in herself before she can be worthy of any identification with a deity.[279] Shakti Devi strongly believes that given that she has great devotion for all goddesses, her devotees respond in the same way, worshiping the Goddess through her. However, she never takes the credit for herself and sends on the devotees' tokens of gratitude to goddesses through prayers.[280]

The practice of *pādapūjā* was also an issue raised by the *liṅgāyat* guru Mate Mahadevi during an interview. Mate Mahadevi is not fond of the *pādapūjā* ritual performed, according to her, out of a feeling of sentimentality on the part of devotees, and some years ago, she tried to put an end to the practice. Mate Mahadevi's initiative was, however, unpopular among her followers and gave rise to strong protests among male *svāmīs* from other *liṅgayāt* communities. Nowadays, although she has not yet been able to convince her followers of the non-utility of the practice, and still permits people to perform *pādapūjā* for her, she has introduced the amendment that the water from the footbath should not be sipped.[281] According to widespread Indian belief and practice, the water from the ritual worship of the guru's feet is regarded as holy, sanctified by the divine, and sipping it is considered as *prasād* from the gods.

The idea of envisioning gurus as embodiments of the divine was not shared by Indira Devi (ca.1920–1998), a follower of Aurobindo,

[278] Field notes, Tamil Nadu, 5.2.2004.
[279] Field notes, Tamil Nadu, 2.3.2004.
[280] E-mail from Shakti Devi, 14.4.2004.
[281] Interview with Mate Mahedevi in Bangalore (Karnataka), 18.11.1999.

either. In a letter to her friends Don Taxay and Richard Miller, written on October 10, 1956, Indira Devi makes the following statement: "I do not believe that the Guru is the ultimate Divine. That sentimental nonsense was nipped in the bud by Dada [her guru] himself. But I have realized that he is the representative of the Lord" (Roy and Devi 1982: 11). This insight is in line with David M. Miller's depiction of Shivananda, the male founder of *The Divine Life Society* movement. In his biography, Shivananda revealed that he strongly opposed being addressed with terms of deference such as *sadguru* ("real guru,") *bhagavān* ("Lord",) or *avatār* ("godly manifestation or incarnation"), considering these words to be a great obstacle and as having caused the downfall of a number of spiritually evolved people (Miller 1995: 90).

The most radical view about women's perceptions of the sacred feminine in a human body is expressed by Anandmurti Gurumaa, portrayed in Chapter II. As mentioned previously, Anandmurti Gurumaa removed a few questions from my list before allowing me to interview her. One question was whether or not she considers herself to be an incarnation of the goddess. Whereas I never received any direct answer to my question, her view on the issue is suggested in some of the texts she has published. In her writings, Anandmurti Gurumaa questions many Hindu practices as "superstitious," and a quote from her website provides ample evidence that she rejects the idea of divine manifestation in a human body as a creation of the mind. One of the questions on the website, "Who is God?" is surprisingly answered by her as follows:

> Who is God? No one! It is just a fabrication and imagination of charlatans to keep man away from its own truth. God is just an idea, a belief created by smart people to fool you, rule on [sic] you. There is no God sitting up above in sky [sic]. […] God is an imaginary dream created by men so that they can entertain themselves and exploit others. […] God is a fiction, a fairy tale. Every religion has its own and every religion says ours is the best. So there are a lot of gods and gods and a lot of god vendors, retailers who sell you this idea. Don't be fooled![282]

[282] http://www.gurumaa.com/who-is-god.php

From these few comments, it seems quite evident that perceiving human beings as manifestations of the divine comes more from the devotees' needs than from those of the gurus. Amritanandamayi suggests that it has to do with the projections of male and female devotees (*The Rediff Interview*, 2.8.2002). This is echoed by Anandamayi Ma who always avoided answering questions about her own identity. Some followers identified her as Durgā, others as Sarasvatī, Kālī, or Rādhā, or believed her to be a saint or an *avatār*. Yet her answer was always: "I am who you think I am," or "This body is like a musical instrument – what you hear depends upon how you play it" (McDaniel 1989: 199). Similarly, most gurus acknowledge that they do not consider themselves to be divine but instead believe that they are a channel or instrument for divine power.

## 7. Does Hindu goddess worship translate into women's social status?

A few Indian and Western gender scholars with theological and anthropological backgrounds, among others, have examined if the reverence paid to women as manifestations of goddesses affects women's social status in more general terms, and point out a problematic use of goddess imagery. Madhu Kishwar claims that many Indian people have difficulty reconciling themselves with the fact that in a culture which worships Sarasvatī, the goddess of learning, so many girls are illiterate; that in a country where Lakṣmī's wealth is emphasized, so many women are poor and economically dependent on their husbands; that in a society where men praise *śakti* as an essential part of themselves, women in many communities are still not allowed to leave the confines of their home without male protection (Kishwar 2003: 25).[283] In the same vein, Ursula King states that "one must clearly distinguish between the place given to women in the world of religious imagination and that accorded to them in the actual world of religious life. These two often stand in an inverse relationship to each other and remain poles apart" (King 1995: 16).

Similarly, in a study on medieval female *bhakti* saints, Madhu Kishwar claims that "Just as the social acceptance of the women *bhak-*

283 See also Morny Joy, "Eccentrics, Ecstatics and Exceptional Women", *The 1993 Charles Strong Memorial Lecture*.

*tas* did not result in expanding options for ordinary women, so also the easy acceptance of outstanding women in unusual roles today does not indicate our society's willingness to grant ordinary women their basic human rights" (Kishwar 1989: 6). Commenting on how goddess worship and imagery relate to women in most world religions, Catherine Wessinger claims that "religions in patriarchal contexts remain patriarchal, even when they conceptualize the sacred in terms of goddesses and impersonal principles" (Wessinger 1993: 11). According to Kathleen Erndl, one reason why there is nothing particularly radical in the Indian perception of the sacred feminine, or in *śakti* related concepts, is that these have been part of traditional mainstream Hindu thought for centuries (Erndl 2000: 9).

While Western feminists have been preoccupied with the centrality of a living goddess in Indian culture and have taken for granted her function as a role model and a source of inspiration and empowerment, field research conducted among Indian followers partly contradicts that view. Cynthia Ann Humes's field study, conducted in Vindhyachal, the home of the goddess Vindhyāvāsinī ("Vindhya dwelling goddess") gave unexpected results. Because of the goddess's and followers' shared association with *śakti* or female energy, believed to empower not only women in general but also people of moral purity, Humes took for granted that goddess worshipers would experience a close and intimate relationship with the great goddess Mahādevī (Humes 2000: 123–124). Contrary to what she expected, however, she observed that her male and female informants do experience a significant gulf between ordinary women and the great goddess, and find the idea of an identification between the two out of place (Humes 2000: 124).

Worshipers reported that they understood the goddess as "a divine being whose power is immeasurably beyond that of human females, and whose nature does not conform to their perceptions of women's nature" (Humes 2000: 124). Accordingly, they had a strong belief that goddesses differ from ordinary women in many respects: in how they are created, in their ability to create, and in their level of spiritual awareness (Humes 2000: 124). What makes goddesses exceptional beings in these followers' eyes is their transcendence, even while confined in human bodies. Another proof of their outstanding nature is that they have the ability to control their sexuality and fertility. Final-

ly, followers believe that goddesses are superior because they have the power “to conquer or subdue evil, to create and support life, and to bestow rewards” (Humes 2000: 146). Moreover, and contrary to ordinary women, followers believe that goddesses are able to control their *śakti* (Humes 2000: 141).

This brief overview suggests that not only for scholars, but also for Indian people, the presence of goddesses in the Hindu pantheon does not necessarily translate into higher social status or greater autonomy for women. In other words, goddess worship alone is not enough to modify the codes of social conformity prevalent in Indian society. In line with that view, Rita Gross claims that the question of whether or not Hindu goddesses provide liberating symbols depends on the reading of the issue (Gross 2000: 106). Considered from the perspective of Western feminist ideology, which evaluates women’s status in terms of autonomy and self-determination, goddess imagery and worship might not appear particularly empowering. However, Gross argues, given that individualism is less pronounced and much less valued in India than in Western countries, and that very few people, be they male or female, have much autonomy, that issue is alien to their thinking (Gross 2000: 106). That view is echoed by Vasudha Narayanan who claims that to seek equality within the explicitly hierarchical Hindu tradition is problematic. While the concept of “equal rights” is essential to Western women, Indian people’s lives revolve instead around the key-concept of *dharma*, “righteousness” or “duty,” within the framework of the broad *varṇāśramadharma* complex (Narayanan 1999: 26).

Rita Gross acknowledges that viewed in that latter perspective, goddess symbolism might have a significant positive impact on Indian women’s lives. According to her, “the first function of goddesses is not to provide equal rights or high status, but to provide psychological comfort”; “nothing is more basic to psychological comfort than the presence of positive female imagery at the heart of a valued symbol system” (Gross 2000: 106–107). She also argues that Western values are not more radical than Indian ones. Viewed from an Indian perspective, she says, the fact that the adepts of Western monotheism have exterminated the goddess and regard femaleness as unworthy of representing the sacred is particularly revealing for the narrow perceptions of religion in Western society (Gross 2000: 107).

In the same vein, Tracy Pintchman points out two different levels of interpreting female symbolism: the personal and the sociocultural (Pintchman 2000: 197). While on a sociocultural level, Hindu goddess worship does not seem to translate into women's social status, gurus and devotees testify that goddess symbolism empowers their personal lives, an observation that is reflected in Nancy Falk and Rita Gross's research:

> When women *have* powerful or provocative myth-models with which they can identify, or when women are exemplary sacred sources, they feel powerful and they are powerful. (Falk and Gross 1989: 233)

From the point of view of male and female followers, goddess symbolism has a significant impact on their own well-being, providing positive female imagery and powerful role models. Each goddess has a few specific, dominant traits which are more or less emphasized, and women appropriate these positive qualities as a source of inspiration. Goddesses communicate continuously renewed visions that inspire, grant strength, and empower people to achieve a dream, teaching them how to walk in the right direction to live life properly. Their examples inspire to self-confidence, enthusiasm, self-control, and self-esteem, thereby encouraging personal growth. Moreover, followers experience peace of mind and contentment in the goddesses' presence. Their significant transformative and therapeutic power is also reported. In other words, goddess symbolism plays a tremendous role in promoting followers' humanity.

Feminine imagery is also empowering for female gurus. From their point of view, being identified with goddesses provides avenues of self-expression that allow them to expand their agency. Their position of embodying omnipotence and omniscience enables most of them to be economically self-supporting through their religious activities, providing them autonomy and considerable power.

The issue of the relationship between women's social status and the presence of goddesses in the Indian pantheon is referred to by some of the women presented in Chapter II. Not surprisingly, Anandmurti Gurumaa is the one of them who expresses her standpoint in the most radical manner. She finds it noteworthy that in a country where men worship the goddess Dūrgā in temples, and wom-

en as *śakti*, the same men can turn into rapists (*Shakti*: 13). She claims that Indian women and men are not given equal opportunities: while young boys are encouraged to have a positive attitude toward their gender, girls are teased from a young age and are considered weaker than men. She complains that women, from childhood, are not welcome and are considered a burden because of the dowry system (*Shakti*: 10–13). She also questions why women are asked to prove their chastity again and again, while it is never required of men (*Shakti*: 16).

According to Anandmurti Gurumaa, discriminating between sons and daughters depends on old-fashioned attitudes and degenerated values for which parents bear responsibility. She advises parents to make their daughters strong and powerful in order to make them self-supportive. She states that this can be done in two ways: first, through education, and second, through professional training eventually leading to financial independence. According to her, marriage should first come into question when these two criteria are fulfilled (*Shakti*: 21). She also advises parents to let their daughters train martial arts in order to acquire inner strength and be able to defend themselves against "street Romeos" (*Shakti*: 65).

By consciously resisting the restrictions placed upon her, Anandmurti Gurumaa invites people to follow her example. She refuses to reproduce cultural values, thus openly challenging conventional Indian standards. She consciously uses her socially sanctioned position as spiritual master in subversive ways, thus challenging all forms of oppression that support patriarchy. Like other contemporary female gurus, Anandmurti Gurumaa has put her message into practice, being herself well educated and having access to significant economic resources through her powerful and growing organization. She thus asserts her agency. Apart from her teachings and living example, she puts her skills to use to benefit women through the *Educational Foundation* within the framework of her *Shakti* project, instituted for the empowerment of underprivileged young women. The explicit aim of the project is to help young girls to become self dependent. Right now, one hundred fifty girls from Punjab are receiving financial support and education up to the 12th grade, and daughters of widows, war-widows, and handicapped parents are encouraged to apply (*Shakti*: 67 – 68).

For Madhobi Ma, also presented in Chapter II, the superiority of women recognized in Tantric contexts is taken for granted, though she is aware that no male would agree with this assumption.[284] Identifying herself as a *śākta*, her opinion must be thus viewed against the backdrop of her religious affiliation. Madhobi Ma claims that according to *śākta* scriptures, female gurus are considered superior to male ones, and that *śaiva* texts explicitly state that behind every successful male *śākta* guru, there is a woman who has backed him up.[285] Interestingly, Madhobi Ma does not choose to identify with goddesses conforming to the established expectations of what is understood as "feminine" in term of softness and self-effacement. Among all the deities of the Hindu pantheon, we have seen that she chooses to manifest Kālī during *bhāvas*, thus focusing upon the "malevolent" aspects of a wild and bloodthirsty goddess transcending limitations.

The example of Shakti Devi, portrayed in Chapter II, appears more ambiguous. In ritual contexts, Shakti Devi is revered by her followers as an embodiment of divine power. On a social level, however, she is discriminated against her husband's followers and close relatives because of her three-fold, inauspicious status due to being a woman, coming from a lower *varṇa* than her husband, and being divorced and remarried. Although she continues her religious activities, organizing regular *satsaṅgs* in her or followers' homes, it seems to me that the resistance she meets on account of her social status sometimes has a "paralyzing" effect on her work, preventing her organization from growing as much as she would wish.

## 8. Conclusion

Goddess imagery and goddess worship are parts of the Indian spiritual heritage and are highly significant in the representations and self-representations of female gurus. In the present chapter, I have examined female guruhood in light of the *avatāra* and *śakti* paradigms, which are central in Indian religiosity. While most female gurus in the present study are associated with one or several specific Goddesses, my material indicates that most of them are understood not only as manifestations, but also as incarnations (*avatārs*) of the sacred femi-

[284] Interview with Madhobi Ma in Delhi, 29.10.2001.
[285] Interview with Madhobi Ma in Delhi, 29.10.2001.

nine, believed to have descended to earth with a special mission, namely to rescue mankind from social and moral decline. Moreover, they are perceived as the embodiment of *śakti*, the creative power of the universe, a widespread mythological concept rooted in a belief in women's powerfulness.

The "divine" character of the women in the present study is sometimes acted out externally through the practice of ritualized and spontaneous ecstasy or *bhāvas*, in which the women "exteriorize" or "actualize" the moods of deities. These moods are expressed in more or less dramatic ways in order to make the divinity available to the religious audience. Interestingly, what emerges from my examination is that most female gurus' self representations diverge significantly from the devotees' representations of female divinity. Whereas disciples understand female gurus to be "incarnations," or at least, manifestations of the divine, most gurus acknowledge that they do not believe themselves to be godly persons, but only channels for divine power.

On the question whether Hindu goddess worship translates into women's social status, my material indicates that there are discrepancies between the religious perceptions of women as goddesses and women's everyday lives. On the one hand, women are elevated to a divine realm and are at the centre of worship and reverence as the embodiment of *śakti* or incarnation of Mahadevī. On the other hand, the same women are excluded from decision-making in social contexts, thus giving men significant power and authority.

On the question whether goddess imagery and worship are empowering for Indian women, we have seen that the issue can only be addressed from a context-specific perspective and that the answer depends on who is asking and interpreting the question. While it has sometimes been put forward that Hindu imagery of "either decent goddesses who are submissively married or frighteningly out-of-control unmarried goddesses" (Gross 2000: 105) serves the interest of a patriarchal culture and contributes to the oppression of women in society, the actual postcolonial trend is to consciously embrace the Indian sociocultural and socioreligious heritage (Erndl 2000: 97). From having been neglected and denigrated by a socialist feminist agenda borrowed from the West in the 1970s, the term *śakti*, familiar to most Indian people, has nowadays been reclaimed by Indian feminists, artists, and intellectuals as a spiritually and socially liberating symbol for

promoting female agency (Erndl 2000: 95–98). Accordingly, whereas Hindu Goddess symbolism might not appear liberating to a Western feminist scholar imposing his/her own cultural biases on another culture, to a gender scholar sympathetic to Hindu traditions of the divine feminine and attracted by the idea of female power, Goddess symbolism might be perceived as highly empowering.

The significance of goddess symbolism in terms of granting spiritual empowerment is a recurring theme in most testimonies from followers and gurus. Believing them to embody strength and power, they acknowledge that Hindu goddesses provide inspiring role models benefiting their own lives. Of the four gurus presented in Chapter II, Anandmurti Gurumaa appears to be the only one who deliberately makes use of the concept of *śakti* to a significant extent in order to increase awareness about social issues among her followers.

# VIII – Conformists or Rebels?

During the past two decades, various academic studies examining female religious involvement in Hinduism have focused upon issues of power, submission, and agency. While previous research emphasized women's restricted positions and access to religious life, postcolonial scholarship acknowledges, among other things, that various forms of evidence of women's superior position in the domain of religion are available. According to these studies, a significant number of women were given the opportunity to play major religious roles through the centuries and to take an active role as spiritual masters or gurus, thus defying the widespread opinion of women's powerlessness. Given that both female and male guruhood are traditionally considered prestigious in India, this role has been regarded with an air of holiness and considerable respect, and a number of women have been honored and celebrated by their followers during their lifetimes.

One issue that has been the focus of recent academic discourse is whether religion limits opportunities for women or empowers them to defy and transgress normative societal roles. Before concluding the exploration of the phenomenon of female guruhood and spiritual leadership in contemporary Hinduism, I would like to examine that issue with the help of the material I have collected. The question I wish to draw attention to is whether female gurus' pursuit of a spiritual career is controversial, and if so, what is challenging and what is traditional about their religious involvement. In other words, I ask whether female gurus' behavior has an impact on the codes of social conformity that dictate their lives, and thereby contributes to socioreligious changes. While I am aware that the term "transgression" can have both positive and negative connotations, my concern here is to look at female spiritual masters' religious involvement from a sociocultural perspective, listening to the voices of gurus and followers. Accordingly, the issue is not primarily examined from a western point of view, with its call for social equality, but from the context of Hindu normative values.

## 1. Challenging social conventions

In the introduction of her anthology, Karen Pechilis rightly claims that "The most radical challenge of the female gurus is not directed toward the received guru tradition but rather the received social expectations" (Pechilis 2004a: 7). In other words, in keeping with the guru ideal, women challenge the socioreligious norms of womanhood, which traditionally are marriage and raising children.

Similarly, and as previous chapters suggest, my material indicates that all the women studied in the present thesis challenge in multiple ways what is socially expected of them. Their spiritual involvement gives them opportunities to reject social expectations and to participate in religious life in ways that suit them. Most of them have chosen to embrace alternative lifestyles which challenge conventional understandings. In Chapter VI, we saw, for example, that Jnanananda Sarasvathi allows herself to live in seclusion in her own home for extensive periods of time, months or even years, thus completely disregarding her family's, relatives', and devotees' social demands. During the 1960s, she cut off all forms of social interaction with the people around her and did not even communicate with her children and relatives through letters. Although she was misunderstood and persecuted by others during the first few years, she is said having accepted her fate, well aware that persecution is a usual part of spiritual life (*The Divine Descent* 1976: 18).

The present thesis also presents support for the idea that female gurus challenge traditional understandings through unconventional behaviors. By immersing themselves in ecstatic states or "divine madness," they disregard their physical needs and what is socially appropriate or not. As examined earlier, Madhobi Ma's displaying of religious ecstasy during *Tārā Bhāva*, Amritanandamayi's and Anandamayi Ma's constant trancelike states in their childhood and teens, and Anandamayi's "fits" throughout her life are particularly illustrative in this regard.

What these examples illustrate is that most female gurus reject their traditional *strīdharma* and duties as wives, mothers, and social beings, in order to embrace their *svadharma* or own *dharma* dictated by a personal choice, individual needs, and own aspirations. By answering in the affirmative the calling to serve God, they choose primarily

to take care of their own needs, instead of taking care of others as is culturally expected of them. In other words, in their strivings for self-realization and self-fulfillment, female spiritual masters challenge traditional notions of female selflessness. Their strong commitment and one-pointed dedication to God, no matter the consequences, thus challenge the female identity of lifelong submission.

Moreover, the present thesis indicates that most female gurus have decision-making responsibilities in areas commonly assigned to males. Unlike most women in Indian society, they are public figures with an international reputation and hold positions of power in their role as spiritual masters. Many of them have established their own organizations around their religious activities and constructed *āśrams* in India and foreign countries in order to guide and shelter large crowds of followers. Anandmurti Gurumaa, presented in Chapter II, is one such powerful spiritual leader. Despite her relatively young age, she is said to have a huge number of followers affiliated with her growing organization, the *Rishi Chaitanya Trust*, which coordinates her worldwide spiritual activities.

My material also indicates that married and unmarried female gurus alike are given the opportunity to lead independent lives and we can see that all four women portrayed in Chapter II challenge marital expectations in various ways and to various degrees. Anandmurti Gurumaa has resolutely rejected married life since her teens, in spite of the initial disapprobation of her surroundings. Although Madhobi Ma did marry, in accordance with the expectations on a girl from a royal background, she nowadays leads an independent life. Together with her male attendant, *svāmī* Sidheshwarananda, she receives her devotees during daily *darśans* while her husband lives his own life on the upper floor of the house. Sai Rajarajeshwari has gained great authority despite her married status and is revered and worshiped by a large Indian and western following. Her identification with the supreme goddess enables her to legitimize her religious status. As wife and spiritual teacher, Shakti Devi has transgressed social expectations on three levels: as a woman, as divorced and remarried, and by not belonging to her husband's *varṇa*. She still meets resistance from her closest circle and one of her major difficulties is that she is partly financially dependent on her husband for her maintenance. However,

despite the obstacles she encounters, she goes ahead with her mission and is perceived by her followers as a guru in her own right.

Moreover, female gurus challenge social conventions through their teachings. In their roles as spiritual leaders, they deliver at least partly unconventional spiritual messages bringing clarity to human issues. Anandmurti Gurumaa, presented in Chapter II, questions the supremacy given to the discursive mind making man "flint hearted" and "concreted [sic]", and claims that real knowledge of the ultimate reality cannot be perceived by reading books or Holy Scriptures.[286] "By merely reading recipe books, you will not get the taste of dishes" she says (*Truth Exposed*: 44). Instead, she strongly emphasizes the significance of the heart in order to, as she says, "Reconnect to our own inner being" and allow man to live "moment to moment."[287]

Most female gurus also question the dreadful habits and superstitions believed to create and maintain bondage. Anandmurti Gurumaa advises her well-educated, middle class followers against hanging bunches of green chilies and lemon, or black pots with a painted ferocious face, outside the house in order to ward off evil spirits or the evil eye (*Truth Exposed*: 103). According to the writing team of the monthly magazine *Soul Curry*, published on Anandmurti Gurumaa's behalf, superstitions are never an expression of real freedom but instead "have risen as a false psychological tool to protect us from fear, uncertainties of life and to give us the feeling of some control."[288]

All these examples illustrate that the position of female gurus in family and society is not one of complete economic dependence on others. Instead of the passive and submissive role traditionally assigned to women, they are social and economic actors, enjoying a great degree of autonomy and exercising a high level of agency. By challenging social conventions, they receive a special status situating them outside the ordinary.

Among the seventy women in the present study, the case of Amritanandamayi, born Sudhamani, is especially interesting as she appears to be the guru who has transgressed social conventions to the largest extent. As mentioned previously, Sudhamani was forced from

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286 *Mudra: Bhaav Dhyan*, meditation instructions on CD.

287 *Mudra: Bhaav Dhyan*, meditation instructions on CD.

288 *Soul Curry* Team, "Superstitions Demystified" in *Soul Curry: a Journey to truth*, December 2005–January 2006, New Delhi, 20–21, p. 20.

childhood to endure pressure from her family to marry, and the threat of violence when she chose to reject marriage. The reason why she faced so much resistance is that her family and relatives feared that mixing freely with her male and female followers from different *varṇas* would be morally detrimental to her. Her mother had long prohibited Sudhamani from talking with her devotees after *darśan*, especially with young boys, as she feared that her unconventional behavior would cause her to deviate "from the path of morality" (Swami Amritaswarupananda 1994: 147), and "bring dishonor to the family name," thus giving her family a bad reputation (Swami Amritaswarupananda 1994: 101).

When Sudhamani's family failed to put an end to what they viewed as her "shameful" behavior, her brother Subhagan and his cousins made an attempt to murder her (Swami Amritaswarupananda 1994: 147–148). One day, after years of harassment for refusing to marry, Sudhamani fell on the ground, apparently dead. According to her hagiography, her body became stiff, her eyes were wide open, and her heart stopped beating. A doctor was contacted but could only certify that she was dead. In despair, her father Sugunanandan begged his daughter to forgive him for the mental pressure he had put on her over the years. Eight hours later and to everyone's surprise, Sudhamani suddenly returned to life. The incident brought a great change in Sugunanandan's attitude towards his daughter and from that moment onwards, he never tried to interfere with her spiritual practices, nor to have her married against her will (Swami Amritaswarupananda 1994: 151–152).

Amritanandamayi's life-story casts light on some important aspects of her personality, and in the following, I would like to argue that her behavior is noteworthy in numerous respects in terms of transgression. First, Amritanandamayi fails to adhere to conventional female behavior when refusing to behave "decently", thus transgressing the boundaries of gender. Second, while the sanctity of celibacy is highly valorized in Indian society, we have seen that the *dharmaśāstras* explicitly mention that female salvation is only possible within the ties of marriage. According to these texts, it is through the performance of wifely and motherly duties that a woman might attain salvation. Accordingly, in choosing to live in celibacy, Amritanandamayi transgresses central sociocultural expectations. She also challenges the

norm of hierarchy that characterizes the relationship between guru and followers.

Following a religious calling and opting for celibacy, especially for Indian women, often expose one to ridicule, rejection, and even physical harm. Susan Sered who has noticed similar tendencies in numerous female-dominated religions claims that the reason why intensive involvement in spiritual activities might be perceived as threatening is that it is believed to erode the most fundamental aspect of the social and economic order, namely, the family institution (Sered 1994: 6–7). Another reason why leaving the domestic sphere, where women are supposed to remain, in order to enter the public one is perceived as threatening is that women's virtue can be questioned.

Moreover, by mixing freely with everyone, Amritanandamayi transgresses traditional boundaries of ritual purity/impurity associated with "caste" affiliation. In her public leadership role as a spiritual master, she advises and counsels people of high standing, thus taking over a role traditionally assigned to "high-caste" members. Receiving every devotee individually on her lap, rubbing their backs and giving them a hug, Amritanandamayi challenges the Indian custom of refraining from physical contact which is especially observed between men and women. She also defies the orthodox tradition by installing *brahmacāriṇīs* as temple priestesses. In 1997, she appointed female priestesses (*pūjāriṇīs*) at the temples of Kaimanam and Kodungallur in Kerala, in spite of the protests of male Hindu priests and scholarly *paṇḍits* (Cornell 2001: 137). For her followers, however, this decision was viewed as an example of the gender equality she advocates.

Given Amritanandamayi's poor and "low-caste" background, entailing that she has had to overcome several socioreligious barriers in order to receive public recognition, it is noteworthy that she is nowadays the most well-known Indian female guru, enjoying unparalleled popularity. She is internationally well-known, and followed in Vivekananda's footsteps as one of a small number of people chosen to represent Hinduism at the *Parliament of World Religions* in Chicago in 1993. With a huge following all around the world, estimated by followers to millions people, she is, without a doubt, the female guru with the largest spiritual following in today's India. One issue which could be interesting to examine, though beyond the scope of the

present study, is whether Amritanandamayi's "low-caste" and poor background predisposes her to violate ritual purity conventions and transgress gender and "caste" boundaries to a greater extent than "high-caste" female gurus would do.

## 2. Following purity restrictions

In the previous section, we saw that women's involvement in spiritual matters, inspired by a mystical calling, gives them opportunities to transgress traditional roles. Believed to be beyond duality (pure/impure, female/male, etc), they transgress social conventions such as "caste" and gender restrictions. Moreover, the message of equality embodied in most gurus' teachings, toning down the importance of gender or "caste" affiliation, and the theological message of *bhakti*, stating that "the last will be first," express hope for social improvement.[289] Accordingly, female gurus appear to be active agents for change. The question now to consider is to what extent their behavior and way of life do transgress socioreligious and sociocultural values.

In an article on female saints in medieval South India, Vijaya Ramaswamy classifies women on the basis of their religious affiliation and social interaction into two broad categories: rebels and conformists. Ramaswamy claims that while some medieval women defied social expectations, most of them subscribed entirely to the traditional role of women as pious and chaste housewives (Ramaswamy 1992: 139). That observation is in line with Caroline Walter Bynum's claim that both tendencies are present in women's religiosity. While examining the lives of female Christian saints from the twelfth century, she simultaneously emphasizes both the subversiveness of female piety, and its fundamentally traditional character, thus revealing the complexity of women's participation in religious life. She states that whereas the mystical role and powerful female religious imagery defy traditional female roles such as wife and mother, medieval women neither fully transgressed the gendered roles of the Church, nor fully contributed to renforcing of Christian orthodoxy (Bynum 2005).

These views are echoed by Marjorie Procter-Smith. In a study on Shakerism, examining the effects of female spiritual involvement on

[289] cf. "But many that are first shall be last," Mark 10: 31.

women, she identifies two religious functions. On one side, there is an emancipatory function enabling women to transcend social restraints, on the other side, a sacralizing function in which women reinterpret traditional gender roles as sacred (Procter-Smith 1993: 25). She claims that, at best, a sacrilization of women's gender roles, such as biological motherhood, recognizes, highly valorizes, and dignifies traditional duties. In the worst case, it provides justification for maintaining traditional gender roles and restricting women's freedom (Procter-Smith 1993). The question I address here is whether we find such an ambiguity in the roles and teachings of Hindu female gurus.

What emerges from my material is that despite their utterly unconventional way of life and the radicalism of their mission, some of the gurus' values are characterized by ambivalence and some of their teachings are quite "conservative." This ambiguity was, for example, visible in Anandamayi Ma's life. On the one hand, her teachings challenged Hindu conventions. She inspired women to be *brahmacāriṇīs*, or female renunciants, establishing the *Kanyapith*, a Sanskrit school for girls aged five to twelve years. She also arranged for certain women to participate in the Vedic ceremony of *upanayana*, with the investiture of the sacred thread, a ritual which traditionally is the monopoly of men (Lipski 1996: 57). Her radicalism is also reflected in a remark when she declared: "It marks the spirit of the present time that women will take their place at the helm of society and men ply the oars" (Lipski 1996: 56).

On the other hand, Anandamayi Ma's teachings and her perceptions of women's role in socioreligious contexts were traditional. She held the ancient Vedic system of *varnāśramadharma* in high esteem and supported arranged marriages. She never advised a second marriage, even for widows. She was also positive to *strīdharma*, the way of obedient service to the husband, and partly followed the prescriptions of the dutiful wife in her own married life.[290] Further, although she considered herself to be beyond "caste" and purity restrictions, receiving all followers irrespective of race, creed, gender, "caste", and color, she

[290] There are however women who deliberately protested against Brahmanical values of ritual purity, practicing religion outside the Vedic fold. Contrary to most of the women mentioned in this study who worship all the gods of the Indian pantheon as different aspects of the Almighty, they belong to the so-called "sects" which arose in the middle ages and emphasized a specific God, such as Viṣnu or Śiva, as their *iṣta devata* or chosen deity. Lingāyats, Aghorīs, *śaivas*, and *śāktas* are examples of these, and I will devote further attention to them in a forthcoming study.

observed certain "caste" regulations in her *āśrams*. One example of such "old-fashioned" values is that people from different *varṇas* ate in separate areas. Moreover, being non-Hindus, foreigners were treated as *avarṇas* or untouchables. They were required to sleep and eat separately and were forbidden to enter the kitchen, which risked being "contaminated" by their presence (Lipski 1996: 56–59).

Similarly, regulations associated with menstruation are ambiguous. In Amritanandamayi's *āśrams*, menstruating women are not allowed to enter the ground floor of the temple at Amritapuri's *āśram*, and are advised against attending *darśan* during the first three days of menstruation. In a similar way, Gurumayi still advises menstruating women to follow purity regulations and does not permit them to perform *āratī* when visiting the *āśram* temples. Moreover, Guru Ma Jyotishanand Bharati claims that women should not actively pray or read scriptures during their periods (Narayanan 1999: 63–64).

Normative texts regard menstruation as a source of ritual impurity and the first three days are considered particularly threatening to women's sexuality. Madhu Khanna gives the following explanation of the issue:

> The blood is a potent substance of procreation and source of human life. The involuntary loss of blood "in excess" poses a danger when a woman's procreative potency expressed through sexuality is capable of being violated by negative forces that may prevent connection. Taboos and restrictions were a means to harness and control, at least symbolically, a women's sexual potency, which should be channelled only into procreation (Khanna 2002a: 49).

As far as Madhobi is concerned, she claims to follow certain *śākta* prescriptions and does not allow menstruating women to do *pūjā* in her *āśram*. She states that for four days, they should be kept in a room, be given food, and observe segregation.[291] According to Vasudha Narayanan, that attitude is in line with traditional Brahmanical perceptions of women's ritual pollution "observed in almost all communities" (Narayanan 1990: 86).

[291] Interview with Madhobi Ma in Delhi, 29.10.2001.

Whereas normative texts regard menstruation as a source of ritual impurity and, accordingly, encourage the seclusion of menstruating women, other views indicate that rest from ritual, social, and economic obligations is a matter of great necessity. Followers of Amritanandamayi claim that the reason why menstruating women are not allowed to go to *darśan* is that they are more open, sensitive, and vulnerable than usual. They are susceptible to strong energies and therefore have to be protected.[292] Hence, they are expected to take rest, thus embracing the widespread Indian belief that menstruation weakens women and that compulsory rest should therefore be prescribed for some days.

Traditional values also affect the perceptions of widowhood among the female gurus under study. After the death of her husband Ramakrishna, Sharada Devi was keen to follow the strict orthodox rules regulating widowhood. However, when she was going to remove the bangles from her wrists and put on the white garb of the widow, it is said that her master appeared to her in a vision and dissuaded her from behaving like a widow (Nirvedananda 1997: 500–501). Sharada Devi also observed the custom of *pardā* until the end of her life, thus following sociocultural codes of female modesty (Nirvedananda 1997: 495).

Moreover, old-fashioned gender stereotypes attributing women and men different roles and qualities are found in the teachings of some female gurus. Amritanandamayi believes that men and women are equal but inherently different from each other, and uses a terminology indicating an essentialist understanding.[293] While women are regarded as weak-minded, for example, men are perceived having "*intrinsically* aggressive, overactive tendencies" (*The Awakening of Universal Motherhood* 2003: 50).[294]

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[292] According to Marika Lilliehöök Hennix who is the representative of the *Mata Amritanandamayi Math and Mission Trust* in Sweden.

[293] Here are some expressions used by Amritanandamayi, quoted in *The Awakening of Universal Motherhood* 2003: "*innate* qualities of motherhood" (34), "women are *essentially* mothers" (44), "What is the very *fibre* of a woman's being, her existence? It is her *inborn* qualities, the *essential* principles of motherhood" (46), "women have an '*inborn*' capacity to shift their mind from one focus to another" (47–48), "her *essential* nature as a woman" (49), "the mother's *innate* qualities are transmitted to the child even through her breast milk" (53). My italics.

[294] My italics.

Strong patriarchal attitudes, such as expectations to follow role models of wifely devotion, are sometimes encouraged by female gurus. Amritanandamayi encourages female housewives to set an example for other women by following the scriptural advice and following in the footsteps of Sītā, Savitrī, and Satyavatī, all examples of the classical *strīdharma* ideal. She admires Sītā as a symbol of purity and chastity, and taking Sītā's one-pointed devotion toward her husband Rāma as a model, she claims that women should worship their husbands like Gods (*Awaken Children!*, vol. I, 1997: 82–83). Anasuya Devi from Andhra Pradesh advised women to perform *vratas* ("vows") for long marriage and the welfare of their husbands. According to her, men should only observe one *vrata*: *ekāpatnivrata*, i.e., to keep to one woman, thus suggesting that for women, keeping to one man is taken for granted.[295]

In *Sahaja Yoga*, women are valued for their roles as wives and mothers and are not encouraged to be active and powerful outside the domestic sphere (Coney 199: 125). They are respected for their domestic and nurturing virtues and skills as emotional providers (Coney 199: 124). Followers of *Sahaja Yoga* are also given the opportunity to undergo the Indian custom of arranged marriages. These marriages, in which the Hindu ceremony is performed *en masse* by the religious leader Nirmala Devi, often take place between followers of different nationalities, among others westerners (Coney 199: 131).

These few examples indicate that whereas, many of the female gurus' teachings encourage followers to step outside their traditional gender roles, these gender roles are regulated and sustained by traditional stereotypes of femininity and masculinity. Rather than fully challenging existing gender roles and social conventions, the spiritual prescriptions they impart not only appear to legitimize patriarchal values but also to reinforce the traditional Hindu family ideal. In that respect, their prescriptions do not appear especially socially transformative and do not alter the social status of women significantly.

The discrepancy between the subversiveness of female gurus and the fundamentally traditional character of some of their teachings has been referred to and analyzed by a few western scholars, providing different comments on the issue. In Catherine Ojha's article, based on

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[295] Field notes, Jillellamudi (Andhra Pradesh), 30.11.2001.

the study of thirty-eight female ascetics in Varanasi, one of her conclusions is that although the women investigated might be perceived as "rebels" for their religious choice, they never profoundly question the established order:

> The influence [these rebels] get is not used as a platform of revendication in order to criticize such or such fundamental aspect of the social model. […] when they speak, it is to encourage people to respect their *svadharma*, to urge them to adopt a dharmic behaviour. When, more particularly, they address themselves to other women, it is to ask them to follow with more dignity the rules of this *strīdharma* which their own life belies. The defense of the caste system, and of all the exclusive types of attitudes involved by it, is also their great preoccupation. They admit themselves that in their private life they may disregard certain rules but that in public it is their duty to keep their distances in order to educate people. In this respect they are not different from the majority of *sādhu* who though they have left the norm behind, are taking part of the *dharma raksaka*, or protectors of the *dharma*. […] In the case of the female ascetics, it may sometimes amount to discourage [sic] other women from doing what they have done themselves. But, by strengthening the most orthodox socio-religious values they are assured to maintain a good reputation. (Ojha 1981: 280–281)

As far as I am aware, the origin of such ambiguities is profoundly rooted in Hindu theology. It is a component of *bhakti*, explicitly presented in the Bhagavadgītā, and here echoed by Amritanandamayi, while advising her followers to follow *ācāra*, i.e., customary observances and codes of conduct:

> Once you make a *sankalpa* to be in the body and to work to save the world, the circumstances become such that you have to follow the traditional ways of society's rules of conduct. Otherwise, society is disrupted if social norms are ignored. If you behave in a strange way without following the moral and traditional norms, you will do harm to other people around you and you will be destroying

> rather than saving the world. (*Awaken Children!* 1993, vol. V: 141–142)

As previously referred to in Chapter VI, the Bhagavadgītā stipulates that one should follow one's *dharma* or worldly duties received from birth[296] whatever the external circumstances, and accept one's fate independently of what it looks like, by being emotionally detached from its results (Bhagavadgītā III.19). The text thus suggests that freedom has nothing to do with issues of social justice or women's social rights but should primarily be understood as a state of mind.

The ambiguity embedded in *bhakti* theology is partly recognized by scholars. The historian Romila Thapar claims that an attempt to transcend duality and attain universalistic identity through the pursuit of an absolute or *brahman* fails as social customs, ritual, "caste" identities, and distinctions between high and low continue to be maintained (Thapar 1997: 66). According to Hopkins, the *bhakti* movement has through centuries been forced to constant "adjustments" with the orthodoxy in order to reduce tensions and to survive (Hopkins 1998: 6; 14). This statement is echoed by Gokhale-Turner who claims that "the legacy of the *bhakti* tradition [...] lies in the acceptance, however reluctant and questioned, of the *varna* order" (Gokhale-Turner 1981: 32).

In the same vein, Eliot argues that remaining on a good footing with traditional Brahmanical values by keeping one's place in the "caste" hierarchy is of the utmost importance for every Hindu's survival. As he puts it, "The only essential tenets of Hinduism are recognition of the Brahman caste and divine authority of the Vedas. Those who publicly deny these doctrines as the Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs have done, put themselves outside the pale" (Eliot 1954: vol. I. 40), a view also shared by Brian K. Smith (Smith 1998: 14–15). This is also echoed by Anncharlott Eschmann who claims that one reason why gurus do not strongly oppose the *varṇāśrama* system is that if they did, they may be "outcasted," and subjected to social and economic boycott. However, she does not think this scenario is likely to happen because, whereas gurus may eat together with people of all "castes"

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[296] cf. a view expressed in the Protestant ethic: "The individual should remain once and for all in the station and calling in which God [has] placed him, and should restrain his worldly activity within the limits imposed by his established station in life" (Weber 1958: 85).

once a year, they nevertheless continue to marry within their own "castes". Hence, they do not affect the *varṇāśrama* structure. She also claims that in spite of its acceptance of members of all "castes", a radical *sampradāya* might develop in such a way that it develops "subcastes" of its own, as for example in the case of the Vīraśaivas (Eschmann 1997: 113).

Speaking of past female *bhakti* saints, A.K. Ramanujan claims that whereas exceptional women and their unconventional values and deeds were accepted, they were also contained: "If they were not accepted, they might become *real* alternatives. The acceptance, the worship also co-opts it, takes the sting out of it. That's one reason why *bhakti* movements, radical in their beginnings, get routinised" (Ramanujan 1989: 14). While outer behavior dictated by religious motifs does transgress social norms, religious values tend mainly to be conventional. In other words, freedom is and remains, by and large, an inner process.

Weinstein and Bell draw similar conclusions from Christianity:

> Jesus had never intended to subvert the social order but rather established his church to alleviate suffering and provide the means of salvation. There is no hope of social inversion in this world or even of significant progress before the end of time. City of God and earthly city were metaphors for the states of grace and sin, not alternatives of political order. (Weinstein and Bell 1982: 194)

This theme is also dealt with by Grace M. Jantzen. In her monograph on Christian mysticism and gender, she makes a few comments on the resurgence of interest in popular spirituality in modern times, visible, for instance, in devotional and New Age literature. In such studies, spiritual practices such as meditation and prayer are advocated as means to bring peace of mind and alleviate human suffering. Whereas Jantzen does not want to minimize the benefits of personal well-being and inner strengthening through such spiritual practices, she claims that by cultivating inner peace and tranquility, spirituality tends to offer palliatives to help cope with the stress arising from unjust social conditions. Jantzen believes that prayers of tranquility help people to put up with corrupt political and social structures instead of inciting them to channel their anger and distress into energy leading

to constructive change. Accordingly, she argues that the social disabilities and structures of injustice not only remain unchallenged but are also reinforced, leading to social *status-quo*. According to Jantzen, the reason why spirituality is never really transformative is that it does not address the question of the real origins of the distresses of life, given that human suffering is treated as an essentially private issue (Jantzen 1995: 20–22).

While most western scholars do believe that religious practices never translate into a transgression of the social order, that view is contradicted by a few female gurus who do question the established order and the social structures of society, at least in their teachings. Anandmurti Gurumaa, presented in Chapter II, has highly progressive views regarding socioreligious issues. In different publications, she vehemently questions rules and beliefs such as mechanical ritualism, what people do in the name of religion, superstitions, the ill-treatment of women in Indian society and more particularly of widows, and the status associated with the ochre robes of the *sannyāsin*. She also denounces Brahmanical purity restrictions. Speaking of menstruation, she asks the reader: "You have been made to fear till now, that after menstruation begins, the woman must not offer prayers or perform any religious rituals during those 4 days of the month. Whatever a woman touches in that state, will turn impure. Who has said all this? Male *pandits* and male Gurus have told you all this" (*Shakti*: 23–24).

Anandmurti Gurumaa's questioning personality has led her to put her radical views into practice. There is, for example, a widespread Indian belief that if a menstruating woman touches pickles during the first four days of her periods, the pickles will get spoilt. In order to get rid of this myth among her followers, Anandmurti Gurumaa let a female scientist from Hyderabad (Andhra Pradesh) conduct an experiment some years ago. For three months, the scientist and her associates let menstruating women touch and prepare pickles, under the greatest scientific rigor and discipline. The outcome of the experiment turned out to be what she expected, i.e., that not a single pickle got spoilt. From that experiment, Anandmurti Gurumaa draws the conclusion that impurity does not reside in women's bodies but in people's minds, and comes from ignorance (*Shakti*: 24–25).

Anandmurti Gurumaa also denounces the prevalent discriminatory and brutal treatment of girls, the practice of female infanticide, and foeticide. She has started "Shakti," an educational program the aim of which is to empower girls. She regularly organizes camps for schoolgirls in her *āśram*, where training in self defense is taught and offers career counseling to help girls become "self reliant and self dependent; to help them to realize their potential, and develop a sense of self-respect, dignity and self confidence".[297] Anandmurti Gurumaa also provides educational scholarships for seven hundred girls and has introduced *Computer Education Awareness Programs* (CEAP) in various schools of Sonepat District where her *āśram* is located.

## 3. An inner, silent "revolution"

Despite the fact that most female gurus within syncretistic Neo-Hinduism do follow certain social conventions, most followers nevertheless acknowledge that being in their presence and experiencing "what they are" is a "revolutionary" and life-transforming experience, profoundly challenging their fundamental values and beliefs. Although labeling women's influence as "revolutionary" might evoke associations with the feminist movement in Western countries in terms of creating equal opportunities for men and women and focusing upon women as a discriminated group, as used in this chapter, the term should not be taken in that way. As previously mentioned, most female gurus are not actively working for women's social rights or political change and do not actively question the patriarchal structures that subordinate and marginalize women in their society. However, whereas most of them appear not to have any social agenda at all apart from their charitable activities, followers acknowledge that they experience considerable spiritual benefits in their presence.

There are numerous testimonies of what is understood as the miraculous working of the guru's "grace" in the followers' lives, affecting them positively in numerous areas. My informant Mohan Rao, who is one of Sai Rajarajeshwari's disciples, told that some years ago, a large fire broke out in his factory. He and his colleagues were expecting the company to lose a considerable sum of money. In that precarious situation, Mohan Rao took guidance from his guru and received the fol-

[297] *Shakti: Empowering the Girl Child*.

lowing answer: "Why are you worrying? You should not worry, I am with you." Sai Rajarajeshwari gave him a flower to put in his pocket and said once again: "I am always with you." Mohan Rao said that after his meeting with Sai Rajarajeshwari, the problem resolved itself completely and that, surprisingly, the company did not lose any money. He strongly believes that this experience contributed to strengthening his bond with his guru, and that his faith in her spiritual skills increased considerably from that day onwards.[298]

The positive effect of being in the presence of a spiritual master is also reflected in stories recounting people's first meeting with the guru. That encounter is narrated as an emotionally charged and life-transforming event by most believers I have met, and as sometimes leading to spiritual conversion. The American author Karuna Poole gives the following account of her first encounter with Amritanandamayi:

> I immediately slipped into a deep altered state of consciousness. I knew other people were in the room, but lost awareness of them. As my whole being filled with the music, I began to weep uncontrollably. Diane [her friend] had warned me that it would take time to become accustomed to the different culture. Instead of feeling as if I was in a foreign culture, I had the overwhelming sense that I had come Home. I felt as if I had been starving for a lifetime and that every cell in my body was opening to take in the nourishment offered by the music. I fed and fed and cried and cried. (Poole 1997: 6)

Karuna Poole says that in the course of a few minutes, her spiritual understanding changed radically. Despite having perceived herself as non-believer in reincarnation when she entered the room, she suddenly began to be "slightly open to the possibility" (Poole 1997:6).

Coming close to a guru is viewed by followers as an intense heart-opening event, "a moment of emotional upheaval and catharsis" (Warrier 2000: 37). Maya Warrier describes followers' first encounter with Amritanandamayi as follows:

[298] Interview with Mohan Rao in Mysore (Karnataka), 5.2.2006.

> Most devotees, while describing their initial experience of the Mata's embrace, express their utter surprise and bewilderment that the embrace should have triggered such a violent surge of emotions. Mostly they are unable to account for their bouts of weeping in the Mata's arms and attribute it to some extraordinary effect of the Mata on them. What they "experienced" in the Mata's arms during their first encounter, and what they feel repeatedly at each subsequent *darshan*, is this unaccountable emotional catharsis, and this, for most individuals, establishes unequivocally that there is "something" about the Mata – that this is no ordinary mortal but somehow, unique, extraordinary and "divine". (Warrier 2000: 37–38)

For most devotees, this initial experience of meeting a spiritual master goes beyond emotional upheaval and is remembered as a moment that changed their lives for ever in inexplicable ways. This experience is attributed to the divine agency of the guru, in the presence of whose power they come in contact with their distress and helplessness (Warrier 2000: 38).

Catharsis, or purification of body, mind, and soul, is part of the spiritual process in many mystical traditions all over the world as it is believed that a purified soul, free from desires and worldly attachments facilitates spiritual absorption or mystical union with the sacred. Bodily and psychological forms of purgation such as ritualized fasting, sexual continence, recitation of mantras, seclusion or isolation, meditation, and silence are thus practiced, often engendering an emotional cleansing and release of deep emotions. All these practices are employed to various degrees by the women in the present study and are said to have an immediate and transformative impact on the spiritual seeker as they promote constructive change.

Anandmurti Gurumaa, presented in Chapter II, makes use of specific breathing techniques in order to induce such an emotional cleansing among her followers. According to her view, recorded on a CD, people's minds are not still but are in a constantly disturbed state because of being exposed to various kinds of pressure such as societal and family demands. She believes that a mind in turbulence gives rise to pain, anger, anguish, and distress, and needs to be helped to release the emotional pressures caused by that negative state. One method for

curing that state of constant tension, she claims, is the use of breathing techniques, helping layers and layers of "impurities" to be opened up and released. During the meditation sessions taking place in her *āśram* twice a day, Anandmurti Gurumaa alternates between different breathing techniques, common in *haṭhayoga* practices: *bhastrika prāṇāyāma*, a dynamic, forceful, erratic, and diaphragmatic breathing technique, and *ujjāyī prāṇāyāma*, or "stretching" of the breath. These traditional views of the nature of the mind and meditation techniques show great similarity with Vivekananda's interpretation of classic *rājayoga*.[299] During a phase of the meditation session, Anandmurti Gurumaa encourages followers to welcome and express whatever emotion may arise, whether it be weeping, laughing, or screaming.[300]

Another technique employed by most gurus is the transmission of spiritual energy or *śakti*, a process sometimes referred to as *śaktipāta* or "descent of the *śakti*." Transmitting spiritual or cosmic energy, which traditionally constitutes the essence of certain forms of initiation, is not mentioned by all gurus because of its esoteric, and thus secret, character. According to Tantric textual sources such as the Kulārṇāva Tantra (14.34) however, spiritual energy can be transmitted through the guru's touch (*sparśa*), gaze (*dṛksaṁjña*), and thought (*mānasa*).[301] The guru's determination in line with specific vows (*saṅkalpa*), viewed by followers as the guru's "grace" (*kṛpā*), is also mentioned in texts as a means of energy transmission. Another way to transmit energy is through the imposition of hands. Shakti Devi, presented in Chapter II, makes use of the imposition of hands on her followers' heads in order to channel spiritual energy. In *āśrams* with various religious orientations, I have often witnessed how sessions of energy transmission contribute to a strong release of emotions among followers.

According to most spiritual seekers, guidance in major decisions leading to personal well-being in the form of peace of mind, courage to face the challenges of life, mental strength, inspiration, enthusiasm, and inner happiness are some of the benefits mentioned when listing what they receive from their interaction with a guru. A thirty-eight-

299 See for example "Six Lessons on Raja-Yoga" in Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Lectures and Discourses,* vol. 8, Calcutta 1964, 36–52.

300 Anandmurti Gurumaa: *Urja: Sakriya Dhyan*, meditation instructions on CD.

301 Kulārṇāva Tantra, p. 267.

year-old female follower of Shobha Ma in Varanasi expresses it this way:

> When I have some questions, she gives the appropriate answer so it will be best for you because though she is God, she is very practical, she is very practical. She knows what good and bad effects. So, when you are upset, when you don't have the confidence of doing something, you ask her and she says something and automatically it gives you some strength. So, after that, you have the confidence. "OK, I have told it to Ma, she has given me the answer. If I do it, I think." And the inspiration is there. She is very encouraging, she never discourages a person, whatever you feel like, whatever you do, definitely you are doing a good thing, you are not doing any bad thing. I think that it is a lot of inspiration that Mother gives you. She says what is good and bad for you and for that, if you ask something: "Will I do it?" she says "Yes" so, automatically you get some inspiration. "OK, she has told me to do it, I should do it. It will be successful because she has told it. She knows what is good and bad for me, what is best". And the thing is that when you are mentally upset, when you are not feeling well, when you get a lot of depression, she says something and she gives you strength.[302]

Another woman, a seventeen-year-old follower of the same guru reports having similar experiences.[303] Inspiration, enthusiasm and spiritual guidance are also what *svāmīnī* Krishnamritaprana experiences in her close contact with Amritanandamayi.

> She was born to inspire the world, and give the people enthusiasm and teach them the right path, and then it is up to the people to walk in that direction.[304]

According to what most female gurus and followers acknowledge, a frequent misunderstanding among Westerners is that the majority of people drawn to charismatic leaders are weak, dependent persons

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302 Interview with Piyali Sen in Varanasi (Uttar Pradesh), 5.12.2000.

303 Interview with Sutapa Dutta in Varanasi (Uttar Pradesh), 5.12.2000.

304 Interview with swami Krishnamritaprana in Amritapuri (Kerala), 13.12.1999.

with poor self-esteem, living in a state of permanent psychological distress. They claim that whereas gurus do address situations of distress, giving answers to pressing questions regarding personal life, health problems, family discord, career changes, and financial constraints, they also appeal to a wide range of people whose goal for *sādhana* is fulfillment of their potential as human beings, spiritual growth, and self-realization. As Anandmurti Gurumaa puts it:

> Spirituality is not for retired, sick and old people. It's for every living being. It will teach you how to fight, how to live, how to celebrate, how to face the ups and downs of life without being broken. Spirituality prepares a person to live. If you don't have that, then you can't live your life. How could you? (Varughese and Kalra: 2005)[305]

While abuse and manipulation have, in some specific cases, been the motors of the guru-disciple relationship in India, most female gurus in the present study have, as far as I am aware, never been the object of people's suspicion.[306] As such, the message of "surrendering to the guru's will" which is at the core of the teachings of most female Indian spiritual masters is never perceived as harmful by followers. On the contrary, many of them acknowledge that the process of surrendering to a guru and of letting go has a tangible therapeutic effect offering a radical departure from the present situation and promoting psychological empowerment. In the final part of her account of her nine-year spiritual journey with Amritanandamayi, Karuna Poole summarizes her process of spiritual growth as a profoundly transformative experience:

> My years with Mother have been filled with an almost unbelievable level of challenge and growth. My personal

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[305] http://lifepositive.com/Spirit/Guru/Spirituality_Equips_you_to_Live52005.asp

[306] The only exceptions I have encountered are *Sahaja Yoga* and *Siddha Yoga*. For *Sahaja Yoga*, see Judith Coney, *Sahaja Yoga: Socializing Processes in a South Asian New Religious Movement*, New Delhi 1999. For *Siddha Yoga*, see for example Lis Harris, "O Guru, Guru, Guru," *The New Yorker*, November 14, 1994, and Sarah Caldwell, "The Heart of the Secret: A Personal and Scholarly Encounter with Shakta Tantrism in Siddha Yoga," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, Oct 2001, vol. 5.

Moreover, Sathya Sai Baba, who is associated with Rajarajeshvari, and Ramakrishna, who is associated with Sharada Devi have been made aware of the media reporting and scholarship concerning some anomalies around their personal and religious activities.

> spiritual journey has amazed me. I believe that asking Mother to be my guide and teacher resulted in speeding up the rate in which the universal "lessons" come. She has provided me with the support I need as I move through each challenge. I am thankful that I have her to guide me as I make my way through unknown territory. I am also thankful, and quite certain, that she does not "do it for me." As far as I am concerned, meeting and going through each challenge is what creates the joy of living. I would not want anyone to do it for me. (Poole 2000: 235)

In his dialectic framework, Weber opposed charisma and bureaucracy, where bureaucracy is related to rational thinking and charisma with irrationality and rejection of social rules (Weber 1969: 361). Weber regarded charisma as an innovative force, inducing creative and innovative human impulses, and challenging conservative tendencies and traditional modes of social action. In a study of charismatic business leaders, Jay A. Conger argues that charismatic leaders, whether spiritual or secular, "are by vocation change agents" (Conger 1991: 4). He claims that what makes charismatic leaders different from other people is that they have the ability to formulate, articulate, build, and achieve a vision of a deeply challenging future, a utopian goal they want to achieve along with their followers.[307] They are not satisfied with the *status-quo* and therefore often offer a new, well-articulated, coherent worldview and fresh approach to life (Conger 1991: 29). Emanating from a deep inner sense of knowledge, and an inner conviction of the rightness of the path to follow, charismatic leaders have the ability to inspire and motivate people, and their spiritual messages are communicated in light of that vision (Conger 1991: 29–32). Charismatic leaders have the ability to create an atmosphere of trust that supports the feeling of sharing a common goal and common vision (Conger 1991: 32–34).

Conger also claims that charismatic leaders inspire people to do their utmost for a more general cause, put high expectations on their subordinates, and encourage extraordinary commitment (Conger 1991: 132; 125). Being constantly in search of new opportunities and challenges, they see the shortcomings of any situation and have the

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[307] See Conger 1991, Chapter 2, "What makes the Charismatic difference," 21–36.

ability to resolve them (Conger 1991: 37). They help shake people out of their own inertia and inspire them to take risks (Conger 1991: 33). They motivate change and set the direction of change through a clear, strategic vision, thereby alienating the forces that represent the *status-quo* (Conger 1991: 29; 43). What characterizes charismatic leaders is that, unlike ordinary people, they are not trapped in the inertia of norms and conventions. Hence, they have the ability to revitalize, re-generate, inspire, and strengthen their creativity, in order to promote new thinking (Conger 1991: 17–20). Their efforts provide stimulating challenges that help people to raise their consciousness, thus generating assertive followers with self-worth moving forward to higher needs. They also convey a sense of purpose and meaning (Conger 1991: 132–136). While Conger is well aware that charismatic leadership might be used to abuse and manipulate people,[308] his focus, as well as mine, is on the "positive" aspects of charisma.

As teacher, a guru is traditionally responsible for his or her disciples' spiritual growth, and his or her teachings amount to spiritual guidance. Common to all gurus' teachings is that human beings are trapped by the mind. The guru's role is to help students in their spiritual quest to see "reality" as it is beyond the veil of mental blockages and compulsive habits, i.e., beyond the *ego* that obstructs that perception and prevents the seeker from experiencing inner freedom. Testing the faith of disciples in order to determine the depth of their devotion is therefore considered as one of the preceptor's duties. That continual testing is understood as a way of purifying the disciple's character and perfecting his/her ability to serve the master unconditionally. Through testing, the guru challenges the disciple's limits, pushing him to the edge of what he or she can stand. Testing is supposed to be a catalyst in the process of erasing the *ego*, forcing the disciple to transcend desire – material and emotional attachment to such things as fame, power, pride, jealousy, vanity, anger, greed, and selfishness, believed to obstruct potential salvation. The expression "to please the master" is often mentioned in the gurus' teachings. Most gurus claim that when the master is pleased, he or she may "bestow" the supreme "gift" of enlightenment through *saṅkalpa* or his/her determination in line with specific vows.

[308] See Conger 1991, Chapter 8, "The Dark Side of the Charismatic Leader," 137–158.

Referring to the strategies used by charismatic leaders to induce change in their subordinates, one of Conger's informants makes the following comment:

> Nothing can happen until the need for change translates into an actual awareness of that need. You often have to force that awareness. First of all, you have to make people uncomfortable. There are a lot of funny things running around in people's heads distracting them from "what is" reality. You have to get people to see the "what is," to see reality, to see that they're not contributing to the best of their abilities. (Conger 1991: 30)

Making people uncomfortable through "tests" in order to promote spiritual growth is a recurring theme in the biographies and hagiographies of spiritual masters. To a devotee's question "Why is Mother always creating sorrow in our minds?" Amritanadamayi answers:

> Son, it will be like this until complete surrender and refuge is sought. Complete surrender and discipline under the Guru's guidance is needed. Is it not a life of renunciation? It is not possible to get closer to God if there is no sorrow of some kind. Therefore, God will create some kind of difficulties through Mother. Having heated the iron in the fire, the ironsmith beats it. It is not possible to beat it into a shape without heating it up properly. Reformation won't happen if the iron thinks: "I will not allow myself to be heated in the fire." The Guru will create obstacles and sorrows for the disciple. The disciple should overcome all that with intense *sādhana*. Spirituality is not for idle people. The difficulties of the subtle level are hard compared to the sorrows of the external world. There is nothing to fear for one who dedicates everything to a *Sadguru*. (*Awaken Children!* vol. I, 1997: 200–201)

Amritanandamayi's disciples are said to go through three main phases in their spiritual development. During the first phase, followers usually fall in love with their guru. Then comes the stage where they feel "cooked" by her. At that point, Amma begins to "work on them," showing them their weakness and negative tendencies. During this cooking stage, she instructs her students to remain calm in the

face of whatever discomfort they might feel inside, and just witness what they are going through, as the experience of pain is believed to depend on the resistance arising in the mind. When anguished disciples ask for guidance, Amritanandamayi often just answers, "Don't worry" or "Everything's fine," answering specific questions only if it benefits the spiritual process (Poole 2000: XIV–XV). The final phase of the spiritual process is to achieve enlightenment, or as followers say, "becoming one with Amma."

*Svāmī* Paramatmananta Puri is one of Amritanadamayi's oldest disciples. Referring to the experiences of his own *sādhana*, he gives the following account of his guru's testing:

> In my own relationship with her I found a gradual but definite change. When I first came to her, she showered her motherly affection on me. She even fed me with her own hands. She spent most of her time with me and one or two others who were living there (Swami Paramatmananda Puri 1987, vol. I: 275). [Later on], I noticed a particular change in Mother's attitude towards me. Whenever I came near her, she ignored me. Even when I was talking to her, she would abruptly get up and walk away. (Swami Paramatmananda Puri 1987, vol. I: 277)

> It is said that, just as there are three types of doctors, so also there are three types of gurus. The first doctor advises the patient and goes away, not even caring to know whether the patient has taken the medicine. This is like a guru who advises his disciples, but does not care to see whether they are acting on his advice and improving. The second type of doctor prescribes the drug and coaxes the patient to take it. This is like a guru who, being more sincere, shows great patience with a disciple and takes endless pains to explain and coax the disciple to act on the advice given. The last and best type of doctor does not hesitate to step on the patient's chest and force the medicine down his throat, knowing that he will not take it otherwise. Ammachi was like the last type of doctor. (Swami Paramatmananda Puri 1987, Part I: 260–261)

*Svāmī* Amritasvarupananda, another close disciple, puts it this way:

> Mother only loves you. She has only compassion for you, and She is very patient with you. But that external expression of love, compassion, affection and patience does not always help you grow. You remain selfish. You forget the goal and start acting indiscriminately.[...] She will say something when you repeat the same mistakes again and again. She might say something to correct you if She sees you repeatedly doing something which hinders your growth. But She does not scold just for the sake of scolding. If Mother thinks that to say something firmly to you is the only way to make you aware of your goal, then She will say it firmly to create an impression in you. (*Awaken Children!* 1992, Vol. IV: 206)

These testing stages are believed to have purifying virtues which are a precondition for the disciple's spiritual growth and empowerment.

## 4. Non-verbal communication and empowerment

The process of empowerment, described extensively in psychological literature, is embedded in the normative categories of what Micha Popper calls "transformational leadership" (Popper 2005: 57). Popper distinguishes "transformational leadership" from "regressive leadership". According to him, regressive leadership, characterizing, among other things, totalitarian "sects" whose leaders suffer from "narcissistic deprivation," has its source in projective relations between followers with no perception of reality (Popper 2005: 42). Regressive leaders weaken their followers by encouraging them to be dependent upon them. In contrast, transformational leadership strengthens the devotees' abilities and beliefs in their own judgment and autonomy, and creates self-confidence, self-esteem, and greater capacities, leading sometimes to utopian and "revolutionary" understandings (Conger 1991).

Investigating the issue of empowerment in socioeconomic and political contexts, Naila Kabeer claims that it operates at three different kinds of levels. The first one, or "immediate level" has to do with "in-

dividual resources, agency and achievements." Empowerment can also operate at "intermediate levels" through various institutional rules, norms, and resources prevailing in the economic, social, and political spheres of life. The third dimension operates at "deeper levels" such as hidden structural relations of class/*varṇa*/gender (Kabeer 2002: 27). According to Kabeer, change leading to permanent sociopolitical empowerment can solely take place if both individual (level 1) and structural levels (level 3) are encompassed. Moreover, she states that in order to bring about real and sustainable change, rules and laws regulating the institutional level (level 2) need to have a real impact on the social structures of a given context in terms of access to available opportunities. Accordingly, she claims that improvement at a personal level does not challenge social structures and power relations (Kabeer 2002: 26–28).

Unlike such secular models of agency and empowerment, Phyllis Mack states that these can be achieved through the process of enlightenment – or "unity with the creation" (Mack 2007: 434). According to such perceptions, agency and empowerment are not primarily conceptualized as a form of "self-expression" or "autonomy" in the secular senses of the terms. As Mack puts it, they are not considered to be the "freedom to do what one wants" but "the freedom to do what is right" (Mack 2007: 439).[309] Empowerment is related to a desire for "self-transcendence" understood as a conscious act of surrender to a higher power (Mack 2007: 436–438). Whereas enlightenment is considered an essentially internal process by all the gurus I have met, being as such highly personal, it is never understood as private. Accordingly, most gurus and followers acknowledge that enlightenment not only does provide empowerment and agency for the person who achieves the state but also has an automatic and immediate influence on the welfare of mankind and society as a whole.

According to Indian views, the cause of the mental suffering of mankind, whether it takes place within family relations or world conflicts, has its root in a strong belief in a separate, individual identity. It is strongly believed that world-transformation can not be achieved by changing the social system but only through an individual process of

[309] cf. Vasudha Narayanan 1999: 26, mentioned above.

self-transformation. That view is illustrated by one of Kalki and Amma's Western devotees in the following way:

> We will not achieve much by changing the system, because the system is not what is responsible for these problems. By changing or improving the system – whether religious, political, economic, or social – things might or might not improve. Working on the system is like working on the symptom, not the disease. The real cause, the root cause, is this sense of a separate self. Our present society is so preoccupied with the separate self, the individual is so strong, that it has to keep itself secure and safe, even at the expense of others, because that is the nature of the self. Unless that is addressed, it is impossible to expect a fundamentally different world. (Ardagh 2007: 168–169)

Similarly, rather than disrupting the established social order or working directly for social changes, my material indicates that female gurus' usual strategy is to infuse transformation progressively and slowly, along with their followers' successively rising awareness. This "miraculous" intervention and instillation is believed to operate at a subtle level and to unfold naturally, gently, and silently, bringing clarity to people's awareness and inner transformation without any drama. What most gurus suggest is that for spiritual people, this strategy carries more weight than does political rhetoric or premature changes. One charasteristic of this strategy in that respect is the non-verbal transmission of knowledge, understood by most gurus as a powerful and efficient tool for initiating inner change.

The choice of such a strategy can be illustrated by the example of Anasuya Devi. As previously mentioned, at the beginning of her spiritual career, Anasuya Devi's husband strongly opposed her physical interaction with devotees at public *darśans*. After explaining to him that she considered all people her spiritual children and that there should be no reason for suspicion, Anasuya Devi went ahead and forbade followers from approaching her. After some days, her husband changed his mind and consented to let her take followers in her lap. Commenting on that incident, her disciple, Richard Schiffman, claims that women might criticize Anasuya Devi for having "an overly submissive attitude" towards her husband. However, he adds,

“Mother preferred to conquer [her husband] through love and not by an exercise of will. She complied with the patriarchal conventions of her society at the same time that she undermined them, simply by being who she was” (Schiffman 2001: 224). Schiffman understands this subtle strategy as more subversive and thus more efficient than a straightforward demand. He also perceives it as an expression of real inner power, as the following comment testifies: “Mother did not preach the power of women – she demonstrated it.” (Schiffman 2001: 224).

Another illustration of this “undermining” strategy is found in Anandamayi Ma’s life. In all hagiographies about her, Anandamayi Ma is described being beyond “caste” distinctions, thus behaving in an utmost unconventional way. Lipski claims that the reason why she observed “caste” regulations anyway was for the sake of her Indian followers who were in the majority in her *āśrams*. Anandamayi Ma was once advised by a *mahātmā* to follow Hindu norms in order not to keep orthodox people away from her presence and teachings. As Lipski puts it, whereas she was fully aware that respecting “caste” rules conflicted with Western values, she agreed to observe “caste” regulations in her *āśrams* because westerners constituted only a minor part of her following. The reason why she observed “caste” regulations is that she was deeply convinced that Indian people were not yet mature enough to embrace a “caste-free” attitude, but that in time, they would transcend “caste” feelings (Lipski 1996: 58–59).

The subtlety of gurus’ non-verbal communication is attested by *svāmī* Vijayananda, a French physician well-known in spiritual circles who has lived at Anandamayi Ma’s *āśram* in Kankhal, near Haridvar, since 1951. Commenting on Anandamayi Ma’s teachings, he makes the following remark:

> L’enseignement de Mā était très particulier. Chacun recevait d’elle un enseignement différent. Il était la plupart du temps non-verbal. Tout se passait en contact direct et c’était autrement plus efficace que la parole! Ma principale ascèse consistait à rester simplement assis en face d’elle. Le seul conseil qu’elle m’ait donné un jour, c’est de ne pas employer la force. Et, quand elle me donnait des exercices de méditation ou des instructions

> personnelles, elle ajoutait toujours: "Ne le dis à personne!" De cela, je garde donc le secret.[310]

Similar observations have been made regarding Godavari Ma. Whereas her guru Upasani Baba was known as a dynamic preacher, Godavari Ma taught silently. Mani Sahukar, a Parsi woman, who was one of her most devoted followers, said in 1972:

> Godavari Mata never preaches. She never preaches. Her method is very silent. She helps you through a silent projection of her grace, but if you ask her questions she replies. But you will find that when you become very intimate you see the answers without anybody actually uttering them. (Brent 1972: 149)

Silent transmission of spiritual knowledge also characterizes Mother Meera, a guru from Andhra Pradesh living a simple life in a quiet German village. When asked why she chose to settle down in such a tiny place, she answered that her purpose is to show that spirituality can be performed anywhere, even in the middle of ordinary daily life. Like most gurus, Mother Meera never sits idle, and as far as she is concerned, her life revolves around domestic chores such as dusting, cooking, and laundry. Four evenings a week, she gives *dārśans* in an innovative way. During my encounter with her in 2001, I was able to witness her personal way of receiving followers, one by one. First, she looks into people's eyes for some seconds then holds their heads in her hands, while gently pressing their temples in order to transmit spiritual energy. During these *dārśans*, Mother Meera never delivers any discourses or messages, and followers are not allowed to ask questions. Instead, all *dārśan* sessions unfold in silence. What does she teach? Martin Goodman, writer and disciple explains: "It is beyond words. That is why it is often transmitted in silence. It is the same learning, the same transmission, as passes in the deep gazing between a mother and her baby" (Goodman 1998: 222).

In a question-and-answer session with her devotees, Mother Meera explains why she teaches in silence:

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[310] Interview of *svāmī* Vijayananda by Aurore Gauer, "Aux pieds des Himalayas et de Mā Anandamayī".
http://perso.wanadoo.fr/amecoeur/Ame_et_Coeur/N34/Paroles/paroles.html

> Q: What do you see in [the followers'] eyes?
>
> MM: I see many things and help them to solve their problems.
>
> Q: If you know a person's problem, why don't you talk to them about it?
>
> MM: I do not like to hurt or praise people by saying that they have this or that problem. If they have a problem, in silence I will help them. This is my way.
>
> Q: Is it true that they can receive more in silence?
>
> MM: Yes. When you are in silence, there are less thoughts and you can see clearly what your problem is, where to focus, where the problem lies, how to get rid of it or who is really responsible, how much oneself is involved in it and so on. If you want to solve it with a calm mind you find the solution and when you pray, you also receive the solution to your problem. (Mother Meera 1997, Part II: 43)

Robert Schiffman, one of Anasuya Devi's Western disciples gives a few comments on his first encounter with his guru:

> Before I met Amma, I thought a guru was someone who took you by the hand, revealed your innermost secrets, praised you or chastised you, told you in detail how to live your life, taught a profound philosophy, prescribed a *sadhana*. […] Truthfully, I must admit that, after spending more than three years at Jillellamudi, I had yet to see the wrench or to hear any teachings from Amma more metaphysical or profound than: "Take coffee," "Go and eat," or "Don't worry." That isn't to say that there has been no guidance. But the guidance has been far more subtle, more inward than I had anticipated. She didn't tell anyone to do anything or to become anything. She simply reflected us back to ourselves. And then she loved and affirmed us just as we were. (Schiffman 2001: 31–32)

Most female gurus claim that one can learn everything one needs by just watching the gurus, as they mainly teach through their own example. Catherine Clémentin-Ojha speaking of Shobha Ma:

> Elle enseigne surtout par l'exemple: c'est son mode de vie, ses paroles et ses actions ordinaires dans les nombreuses situations de la vie quotidienne et l'atmosphère religieuse qu'elle crée autour d'elle qui constituent principalement son enseignement. Tout ce qu'elle fait, tout ce qu'elle dit est exemplaire. Cette forme d'enseignement requiert la présence physique des disciples qui ne doivent perdre aucune occasion d'être à proximité d'elle pour l'écouter et pour la regarder. Surtout pour la regarder, car en la regardant, en la dévorant des yeux, ils s'imprègnent d'elle; le temps de ce regard, ils abolissent toute distance entre eux et elles. Ils font son *darśana* (vision). Et ce *darśana* les sanctifie. (Clémentin-Ojha 1990: 128–129)

## 5. Conclusion

In the present chapter, I ask whether women's involvement in religious matters is controversial and if it has a positive impact on society in terms of bringing about social change. Similarly to what I advanced in the previous chapter, I claim that the answer depends on what point of view the question is asked from. According to my own observations, we have seen that some of the female gurus' teachings reflecting socioreligious values are characterized by ambivalence. According to Western scholars, that ambivalence depends on the fact that gurus' religious involvement is located within the framework of the *varṇa* system. Being trapped in "caste" conventions, they argue, female gurus never fully transgress socioreligious values. Accordingly, from a social, westernized point of view, female agency only takes place to a limited extent.

From the perspective of male-oriented Brahmanical ideology emphasizing the purity/impurity distinction, however, we can definitively say that the behavior of female gurus strongly challenges socioreligious norms of womanhood. Far from being an obstacle to freedom, the ascetic way of life, with or without social restrictions, is experienced by female gurus and their followers as profoundly emancipating. First of all, given the long Indian tradition of female exclusion from public religious life, women's participation in religiosity is in itself transgressive. Further, by adopting the role of spiritual leaders, and thus rejecting the way of obedient service to the husband, most

female gurus profoundly challenge the prescriptions of *strīdharma*. Moreover, my material indicates that far from being subject to the attention, admiration, and care of their followers only, a few female gurus are also revered by family members, thus reversing the usual standards of social hierarchy. Finally, the women in the present study transgress the boundaries of "caste" when choosing to mingle with anybody. In other words, their religious involvement can be understood as an appropriate way of contesting social restrictions and provides an alternative by which women find avenues for expressing themselves in empowering ways.

In my view, one reason why Western and Indian conceptions diverge can be understood by examinating the perception of change. Whereas secular perceptions of change see it as taking place at a social level in terms of improved social, economic, and political conditions, for female gurus, it is primarily understood as a subtle inner process located within the spiritual realm and closely related to charisma. As Catherine Wessinger puts it, although the women do not usually actively encourage a reform of social structures, "charisma as a source of authority enables a woman leader […] to empower, to a lesser degree, the people to whom she ministers by bringing meaning and healing to their lives" (Wessinger 1996: 5).

In other words, rather than working directly for social or political change, the female gurus' strategy is to progressively infuse transformation at a personal level, in a slow, gentle, subtle, and silent manner. Their primary duty is not to teach people how to fight patriarchal conventions but how to practice peacefulness of mind and detachment in order to dig deeper into levels of consciousness and gain new insights. The result of these practices is said to be profound and overwhelming, instilling agency, self-esteem, autonomy, and authenticity. According to female gurus and devotees, it is this process of inner transformation, gradually leading to a state of well being and inner freedom, which is believed to have a positive impact on society and which acts as a powerful motor for social change in what is labeled by many, including scholars such as Max Weber, as "revolutionary."

# IX – Summary and Concluding Remarks

## 1. Summary

In the present thesis, I have explored the phenomenon of Indian female guruhood in contemporary Hinduism by investigating the spiritual careers of seventy gurus, with a particular focus upon four of them. The common denominators among my sample of women are that all the gurus are female, are Indian, and are located within the Hindu fold. Although it might be tempting to search for similarities and uniformity among the women presented here, a variety of forms of asceticism is what characterizes my material. This variety can be understood as reflecting the flexibility and broad-mindedness of Indian thinking. Given that India is at the junction of different cultures, contradictions are usually accepted as a part of life. Accordingly, the group of women explored in the present study is not homogeneous but consists of an eclectic gathering of people living individual lives and with little knowledge of each other's existence. Female gurus display a wide diversity in terms of age, social and geographical background, *varṇa*, religious orientation and affiliation, marital status, level of education, number of followers, and social position.

In spite of this variety and diversity, general trends can, however, also be discerned. Broadly speaking, I claim that although female gurus in this presentation belong to different *varṇas*, from *brāhmaṇa* to *śūdra*, a survey of their social backgrounds reveals that a majority of those whose *varṇa* affiliation can be identified belong to superior *varṇas*, and are more specifically *brāhmaṇas*. In terms of education, whereas all literacy levels are represented, from gurus holding a Ph.D. degree to illiterate ones, a great majority of the women alive today are well educated. Moreover, while a few of the women come from rural surroundings, most of them come from urban areas. In other words, the majority of the women in the present study appear to be well-educated, with urbanized and middle-class backgrounds.

The fact that most gurus studied in the present study come from an urban area, are well-educated, and have a middle-class background is particularly interesting. This circumstance certainly suggests that these women already possess significant individual resources, which in itself contributes to enhancing their roles as public persons. Their

relatively high level of education might also explain why some of them have become important figures on the global arena, attracting middle-class Western followers.

As part of a social elite, female gurus in today's India also inspire ideas and research questions that could very well be the subject of future studies. For example, contemporary female gurus are clearly part of modern Hinduism which, in many respects, appears to be the result of socioreligious process initiated during the colonial era. Thus, persons attributed religious authority were often motivated by the ambitions of Indian religious leaders to reach a Western audience and to modernize Hinduism for the emerging needs of the modern elite in India. As my thesis repeatedly observes, one such a key figure is Vivekananda. Accordingly, the guruhood phenomenon, either male or female, that we are facing today in the west can not be perceived as a purely Indian export product. Rather, it is the result of more than one century of globalization. This statement is also true for the guruhood phenomenon in the modern Indian middle-class environment, where the seventy gurus of the present study are mainly active. Here, too, social life is permeated by the ideals of modernism and characterized by global patterns of spiritual thought.

Further investigation is also needed to try to determine the extent of Indian female guruhood in other strata of the Indian society, and what differences might be revealed between such a potential group and the seventy women of my sample. It is conceivable that the real number of such unrecorded cases would not be particularly high, given that the phenomenon of Indian female guruhood appears to be primarily associated with milieus influenced by modernity and globalization, and mainly within forms of urban middle-class environment. From a few observations made during my fieldwork in India, it seems likely that female religious leadership in other strata of Indian society can be expected to take on other, more traditional forms of religious expressions such as ritual possession or other ritual functions located outside the *brāhmaṇa* sphere.

In the present thesis, I also examine how the sociocultural and socioreligious environment surrounding female gurus, as well as their personal inner "qualities," such as individual religiosity and spiritual calling, converge and contribute to making the women into what are understood as perfected beings of heightened spirituality. Moreover,

given that the socioreligious and sociocultural context emphasizes women's duty or *strīdharma*, exhorting women to marry, beget at least one son, and worship their husbands as a God, I also investigate whether female gurus experience tensions between their own religious aspirations and the social expectations placed on them as women, as well as in what ways these tensions are perceived and handled.

Hagiographical sources indicate that from an early age, often already from birth, and in some cases even during their mothers' pregnancy, most of the women have distinguished themselves by exhibiting signs of spiritual precociousness, having had strong religious inclinations, and have displayed exceptional spiritual abilities.

In my view, the spiritual climate during their upbringing proved to be propitious for the spiritual life of the majority of them. The gurus themselves, however, claim that this last factor was never decisive for their choice of a spiritual career, thus rejecting the idea that their mystical states were, at least partly, influenced by their socioreligious environment.

From the perspective of comparative religion, we can see that the careers of the women studied in many ways illustrate how tradition and modernity come together, thus allowing the women to perceive and present themselves as holy, and their followers to see them as "set apart" and worthy of devotion. The spiritual context of which the women in the present study are a part of is rich in lingering ancient ritual traditions and shifting religious expressions. In such an environment, it is not surprising that the self-understanding, performance, and interpretation of these women may take on new contents and meanings. Accordingly, and as my research suggests, neither ongoing social change, nor the globalization process seem to prevent people from turning to religion.

Broadly speaking, female gurus do not believe that their calling has much to do with socioreligious demands, even if the external form of their religious involvement appears to be colored by the ambient cultural context. While it is quite obvious that the outer forms of rituals, the vocabulary and expressions employed, the texts referred to, and the gods and goddesses worshiped are all part of the Indian socioreligious context, and while the gurus do acknowledge that they were exposed to spirituality from young age, most of the women claim that these factors had at most a negligible impact on their religious inclina-

tions. They support this claim by arguing that although most Indian people are exposed to a similar socioreligious atmosphere, rituals, pantheon of gods and goddesses, epic narratives, and religious symbols, just a few of them receive that specific calling.

The female gurus claim instead that their opting for an ascetic-like way of life was part of a strong inner calling and vocation based on profound and early personal spiritual experiences, eventually culminating in the state of permanent enlightenment. According to their views, the enlightened state of consciousness is a subjective matter beyond words, usual frames of reference, and normal understanding. Female gurus also consider that the specific call to holiness is an essentially individual and unique phenomenon. The uniqueness of the mystical experience is backed up by the Hindu notion of karma that emphasizes the uniqueness of every human destiny.

When asceticism has received the attention of scholarship, we have seen it to be the asceticism of the male *brāhmaṇa* elite. Hence, little attention has been given to the study of female spirituality. The study of male asceticism has so far mainly focused upon formal aspects of religiosity such as teaching tradition (*sampradāya*), spiritual lineage (*paraṃparā*), and *sannyāsa* initiation with its emphasis on celibacy.

The present study, however, testifies that female asceticism differs greatly from normative patriarchal ideals. Although a great majority of the female gurus were born *brāhmaṇas*, we can see that only a minority of them are committed to the path of celibate renunciation. A major reason is that this male prerogative, expressed in Brahmanical discourse, has traditionally been exclusively reserved for the male members of the three higher *varṇas*, thus excluding *sūdras* and women.

Most women of the present study have either not chosen, or not been allowed to take *sannyāsa*, and they have not been initiated into a formal, textually sanctioned tradition. Accordingly, most of them do not claim affiliation with any specific spiritual lineage but are in the margins of various formal religious trends. Whereas some of them have been formally initiated by living gurus, predominantly male ones, my material indicates that many of them are self-initiated. Moreover, while a few have been given the opportunity to inherit leadership of a spiritual lineage, most of them have not. As such, female gurus have been, and still are, at least theoretically, excluded from positions of authority, a situation which is largely consonant with

Brahmanical ideology, which traditionally never encouraged women to hold positions of authority.

Whereas a few female gurus in the present study acquire their spiritual authority through institutional avenues, we can see that most of them do not. Instead, they assert their spiritual status on the strength of their personal charisma based on what is perceived as an exceptional personality and divine insights. These divine qualities are further reinforced by their association with *śakti* or female energy. Believed to be the embodiment of *śakti*, accumulated through the practice of spiritual austerities or *tapas*, they are considered endowed with considerable power and held in high esteem.

The polyvalence and complexity of gender symbolism in terms of power/powerlessness issues is related to the Indian paradigm of the *pativratā*, or virtuous wife, devoted to her husband within the *strīdharma* paradigm. According to Indian view, *strīdharma* is advocated for women as a model of life and sanctity, and marriage is perceived as a spiritual discipline or a *sādhana*. While most orthodox Hindu scriptures (*dharmaśāstras*) state that men can be enlightened by renouncing the world as *sannyāsins*, they also claim that it is only within and through marriage that women can evolve spiritually.

Accordingly, it might not be surprising that such perceptions still have a significant impact on female gurus' choice of marital status. My material indicates that, in line with Hindu expectations, a majority of the seventy women investigated have opted for married life. However, despite the fact that the expectation of marriage is still a factor exerting pressure on most women, my material also indicates that the female gurus do not believe marriage and *strīdharma* to be necessary for evolving spiritually. Nor is marriage perceived as a major obstacle to the spiritual calling.

One strategy used by female gurus in order to combine the seemingly opposite pursuits of spirituality and marriage is to subordinate married life to the role of spiritual master and divine mother. By subordinating or avoiding marriage, thus rejecting the role of dutiful and virtuous wife, they gain the opportunity to assert their autonomy and agency. That choice is also theologically backed up by the message of the Bhagavadgītā that *gṛhastha* and *sannyāsa* should not be regarded as external states of being, but instead as internal states of mind. It is also facilitated by the strong impact of *bhakti* ideology,

which made religious life accessible to all, and *tantra* and *śākta* ideologies, which do not consider celibacy to be a prerequisite of ascetic life.

Broadly speaking, my material indicates that whereas family members might not initially be supportive of female gurus' spiritual involvement, they usually accept their wives', daughters', or mothers' new "status" after some time.[311] It even happens quite frequently that female gurus, step by step, bring family members to the spiritual path, thus transforming extended families into spiritual ones. Husbands, children, and sometimes all family members might get involved in a woman's spirituality to such an extent that they become devotees and even disciples. Moreover, and along with the gurus' increasing involvement in spiritual activities and the growing number of gathering at their residences, it quite frequently happens that homes are successively turned into *āśrams*.

In a society where women's identities are strongly defined in relation to their husbands, my material indicates that some female gurus feel ambiguity toward married life and have resolutely taken the decision to remain celibate, thus repudiating the reproductive role expected of them. In their endeavor to strain against the confines of a cultural role that they find too restrictive, some female gurus became committed to celibacy as early as childhood or their early teens. As far as I understand, the non-secular climate permeating Indian society, the prestigious position traditionally accorded to guruhood, and the expanding acceptance and prominence of women in public roles of religious leadership in contemporary India facilitate such a choice.

Whereas most of the women are married and some are celibate, my material also indicates that a few of them are widowed, divorced, or simply separated from their husband without having formally divorced. In the present thesis, we have seen that from a Brahmanical point of view, widowhood and divorce have been and still are considered particularly inauspicious. Given the social stigma associated with these two marital states in Indian society, it might not be surprising to find that gurus are no exceptions from that rule. Divorce appears to be especially stigmatizing, and the example of Shakti Devi, presented in Chapter II, is particularly illustrative in that respect.

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[311] I have no information about whether there are women who did not become gurus because of familial pressures.

While some scholars have advanced the opinion that opting for the religious life does provide a means to achieve a decent existence when remarriage is considered unacceptable, we have seen that female gurus' self-understandings of their own life situation diverge from these common perceptions. While researching the present study, I have not found any evidence for the assumption that either married, celibate, widowed, or divorced female gurus would have embraced a spiritual career due to social or economic difficulties. All claim instead that their decision was mainly dictated by a strong inclination and commitment to spirituality from a young age. One probable reason is that most female gurus presented in this study belong to a privileged stratum of Indian society. A second reason might be that the ascetic life is associated with such hardships that only few women are ready to embrace that path.

Both Shyama Ma and Shakti Devi chose to depart from unhappy marriages, mainly for spiritual reasons, thus suggesting that their spiritual involvement was not the result of divorcing and separating, but instead, its very cause. Shyama Ma left her husband and her in-laws because her religious yearning and devotion were misunderstood and led to harassment (Jalan 1977: 22–23; 32–34). In Shakti Devi's case, the decisive factor in her divorce was that she had met a man sharing her spiritual affinities. My material also indicates that a few women became gurus first after their husbands' death. It seems to me that having no more social duties to perform, they felt free to dedicate themselves fully to spiritual life, without the competition of a husband.

In a society where goddess worship is central, we have seen that female gurus are perceived as an incarnation of the divine, thus enjoying high status. However, my investigation of seventy female gurus indicates that the presence of goddesses in the Hindu pantheon does not automatically translate into a high social status or autonomy for women in general. In Chapter VIII, I asked whether the presence of Indian female gurus challenges the very foundation of the *strīdharma* paradigm and offers an emancipating option for women, and found that the answer depends on the perspective.

From a socioreligious perspective, the gurus' views are ambivalent. On the one hand, we find ample evidence that they are part of a normative male-defined tradition. As such, they still observe certain "caste" restrictions, at least to a certain extent. On the other hand, we

can also see that female gurus do transgress male-defined boundaries. Most female gurus of the present study conduct spiritual activities as they like, thus pursuing their own ambitions free from social restraints. According to my view, the spiritual calling sanctions women's decision to detach themselves from their family and from the socioreligious norms and values they are supposed to embody, thus defying socioreligious boundaries. However, my lingering impression after meeting and investigating female guruhood is that despite the fact that the women do have some ambivalent and ambiguous views regarding spiritual issues, these ambiguities are relatively marginal compared to the unconventionality and controversiality of their personalities and religious involvement.

Moreover, while female gurus do not actively work for social rights or political change, devotees acknowledge that being in the presence of a spiritual master is a "revolutionary" and life-transforming experience, profoundly calling into question their fundamental values and beliefs and affecting their lives positively. Instead of actively questioning the patriarchal structures that subordinate and marginalize women in Indian society, the strategy of Indian female spiritual masters is to induce life-transforming experiences in followers. Followers experience such considerable spiritual benefits that they strongly believe the process of inner self-transformation caused by gurus to be a necessary condition for the social transformation of society in more general terms. As such, we can say that the impact of female spiritual masters is particularly challenging in terms of initiating subtle changes and providing female role models to follow.

## 2. Sanctioning and legitimizing female Hindu leadership

Whereas female asceticism differs greatly from male ideals, my material testifies that female gurus have gained considerable popularity as holders of spiritual leadership positions. In the introduction to the present thesis, I referred to Mary Farrell Bednarowski's study of four marginal religious Christian groups from the nineteenth century. Bednarowski stated that for women, four criteria must be met in order to achieve leadership and gain a position of authority: a perception of God that deemphasizes the masculine; a religion that does not view

women as a source of evil; a perception of gender roles that does not emphasize marriage and motherhood; and a rejection of institutional modes of leadership (Bednarowski 1980: 207). Although Bednarowski and I focus upon different religions, I find her scheme useful and her observations pertinent for my study. In order to summarize some of the factors involved in the phenomenon of Hindu female leadership in contemporary India, I go back to Bednarowski's four characteristics and make use of her classificatory system as a tool to structure my concluding argumentation and remarks.

The first criterion presented in Bednarowski's article is a perception of God that deemphasizes the masculine. In Chapter VII of the present study, we saw that the Hindu conception of the divine is not monolithic, but fluid, allowing a variety of expressions, including, among other things, perceptions of God that are personal, impersonal, androgynous, and/or understood as a divine feminine. Moreover, besides theistic, i.e., personal perceptions of God, philosophical perspectives view the divine as a formless, impersonal principle, or *brahman*. Further, in Indian iconography, one way of depicting God is as Ardhanārīśvara, half man, half woman in one body, in an androgynous representation of the sacred. This androgyny or gender complementarity is reflected in dual male/female godly conceptions such as Śiva and Śaktī, Bhagavān and Bhagavatī, or Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, where each couple symbolizes the ultimate reality through wholeness.

Another significant viewpoint, examined extensively in Chapter VII, is the perception of God as the divine feminine. Given that Hindus view female gurus as manifestations of goddesses, women are believed to embody *śakti*, or primordial energy, giving them tremendous spiritual power. Moreover, the fact that female gurus are supposed to have achieved the enlightened state further strengthens their divine status. In the believers' eyes, female gurus are not only transcendent and immanent, but also omnipotent and omniscient, with the ability to meet human beings' need for models of sanctity by acting as exemplary role models. As such, they are objects of worship and devotion and are bound to enjoy great popularity. Accordingly, what emerges from the present study is that divine imagery is practiced and interpreted by women in ways that create emancipatory opportunities. As manifestations of goddesses, female gurus receive ample recognition, allowing them access to positions of leadership.

The second of Bednarowski's four criteria is a religion that does not view women as a source of evil. My study indicates that whereas traditional Brahmanical views are hostile to women's capacity to become religious leaders, because of their supposed ritual impurity, I have not found any evidence supporting the fact that the female gurus in the present study would perceive themselves as sinful. A Caroline Walker Bynum puts it, "In fact, religious women [pay…] little attention to their supposed incapacity" (Bynum 1986 b: 260).

The present thesis instead suggests that female spiritual leaders are highly respected. The power of *śakti* they are believed to embody makes them tremendously powerful. Moreover, because of their marital status, married gurus are considered particularly auspicious. Most gurus display a high degree of self-confidence, choosing to interact freely and equally with all, men and women alike, as well as with people of different "castes" and socioeconomic backgrounds, thus demonstrating that they are beyond "caste" restrictions. Moreover, owing to their spiritual achievements, they are believed to be beyond sin, and are worshiped for their spiritual purity by followers.

Bednarowski's third criterion is a perception of gender roles that does not consider marriage and motherhood as the only acceptable roles for women. In the present thesis, we have, however, seen that besides the notion of *śakti* associated with the divine feminine, another significant and central factor closely involved in goddess and guru worship is the notion of divine motherhood modeled on biological motherhood. In Chapter VII, I claimed that gurus, as manifestations of goddesses, are idealized and revered, among other things, for what are viewed as "motherly" qualities. Whereas marriage, biological motherhood, and divine motherhood have a central position and are highly emphasized and valorized in Indian culture, in feminist discourse, they are sometimes regarded as an expression of traditional gender roles, as reflected, for instance, in Bednarowski's third criterion.

In the introduction, I claimed that symbols are not clear and consistent entities, but are given various meanings depending on how they are interpreted. Accordingly, the concept of motherhood can be interpreted in a variety of ways. In a forthcoming article, I examine the symbolic meanings accorded to motherhood and divine motherhood in a Hindu context through the lens of gender. Looking at two lectures

delivered by two Indian spiritual masters, one male (*svāmī* Vivekananda), and one female (Mata Amritanandamayi), I focus upon how they are narrated and how the symbols revolving around motherhood are valued. Although Vivekananda's and Amritanandamayi's lectures were delivered in two different periods of time, in different contexts, and for different purposes, I found that, broadly speaking, while Vivekananda gives a picture of mothers-as-objects, held in a state of dependency which restricts their time, space, and movement, in order to fulfill men's needs, Mata Amritanandamayi encourages mothers-as-subjects, i.e., independent beings and creators of their own destiny. In other words, my study indicates that whereas male Brahmanical perceptions tend to be primarily ambivalent, focusing principally upon the control of sexuality and procreation, female rhetoric tends to emphasize "positive" values of motherhood such as empowerment, co-operation, shared responsibilities, maturity, and inner growth (Charpentier).[312]

That assumption is in line with Adrienne Rich's distinction between motherhood as institution and the non-patriarchal experience of mothering. Whereas she understands motherhood as institution, and the stereotypes associated with it, as an expression of male control and oppression, "ghettoiz[ing] and degrad[ing] female potentialities," she views women's experiences of mothering as a source of power (Rich 1976: 13). As mentioned in the previous chapter, there is a general tendency among women to accept the dominant patriarchal ideology of the culture and to reinterpret that ideology in ways that empower them (Sered 1994: 84). That view is also held by Sally Kitch who claims that "the metaphor of spiritual motherhood is a positive symbol for women because it transforms qualities that have been perceived as liabilities of female gender symbolism into strengths" (Kitch 1989: 76).

I would therefore like to suggest that the positive connotations associated with divine motherhood for the female gurus in the present

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312 Marie-Thérèse Charpentier, "Divine Motherhood: Gendered Perceptions in a Hindu Context" [Forthcoming]. The two lectures are: Swami Vivekananda, "Women of India" (Delivered at the Shakespeare Club House in Pasadena, California, on January 18, 1900), in *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Lectures and Discourses*, vol. 8, Calcutta 1964, 53–72; Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi, *The Awakening of Universal Motherhood, an address given by Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi at the Global Peace Initiative of Women Religious and Spiritual Leaders, Palais des Nations, Geneva, October 7th, 2002,* Amritapuri 2003.

thesis and their followers strengthen women's right to autonomy, helping them to achieve positions of leadership and authority. In other words, and contrary to Bednarowski's observations, I claim that the concept of "motherhood" does not necessarily need to be a hindrance to female agency.

Bednarowski's fourth criterion is a rejection of institutional modes of leadership. In line with her observations, Chapter V gives ample evidence that most of the women in the present study have gained authority through charismatic, non-institutional avenues, and practice a mode of religious leadership based on personal religious experience or direct experience of the sacred. My material indicates that this informal authority allows them to be independent and autonomous agents, and their powerful religious position allows them to influence their following significantly. By being responsible for the spiritual awakening of people, they not only make decisions about their own actions but also about the actions of others, and as such are endowed with considerable power.

Whereas Catherine Wessinger does believe that Bednarowski's four criteria are highly significant for enabling women to gain positions of spiritual leadership and authority, she also claims that these factors are not sufficient (Wessinger 1996: 6). That insight is also in line with my own observation, presented in Chapter VIII, where I demonstrated that the inclusion of the divine feminine in cosmology, or a perception of God as an impersonal principle, does not automatically translate into women's social status.

Wessinger claims that in addition to Bednarowski's four criteria, social expectations of equality have to be considered as a significant factor enabling women to achieve positions of leadership. By "social expectations of equality," she has in mind factors such as higher education, significant economic earnings, the ability to pursue religious activities outside the domestic sphere, the possibility to gain status in one's own right independently of fathers, husbands, and sons, and the necessity of being valued as much as males (Wessinger 1996: 6).

As the present study has demonstrated, most of the female gurus fit well with the image of middle class, urbanized, well-educated, relatively wealthy, and independent women. Most of the female spiritual masters living today administrate prosperous *āśrams*. Whereas some of them still pursue religious activities in their homes, we have seen

that spiritual practices dominate, and that in some cases family members behave as disciples and followers. In other words, the domestic character of their social environment is significantly downplayed. Moreover, in a society traditionally stipulating that a woman belongs to her father in childhood, to her husband when she is adult, and her sons when she is old,[313] my material indicates that the female gurus have gained status and popularity in their own right and through their own achievements. Further, given the prestigious status accorded to guruhood in general, and to women as embodiments of *śakti* in particular, I claim that female gurus today are valued as much as males in their roles as spiritual masters, at least by their followers. From this evidence, I claim that the Indian sociocultural and socioreligious understandings of female guruhood fit well with Bednarowski's preconditions of spiritual leadership and Catherine Wessinger's demands for social equality. In other words, the female gurus in the present study fulfill all the criteria described above, sanctioning and legitimating their positions of authority and empowering them.

## 3. Shaping and transforming religious leadership roles, discourses, and practices

Whereas female gurus link themselves with tradition to a certain extent, and their role is by and large defined by the society of which they are a part, they are also pressing for changes reflecting their own experiences as women. Their resistance to a patriarchal heritage and their determination challenge established definitions and conceptions, thus forcing a reconsideration of the categories by which they are defined. While focusing more particularly upon female gurus' religious involvement and modes of asceticism, we find evidence that many of the religious activities in which they are involved contribute to calling into question well-established ways of living and reshaping religious traditions and values. In the present section, I would like to suggest that women's contributions, which are partly influenced by the increasing interaction between Indian and Western cultures, are taking place at ritual, didactical, institutional, and conceptual levels.

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313 Manusmṛti, V.148.

At a ritual level, we have seen that many contemporary female gurus valorize and support female public ritual roles, thus challenging centuries of marginalization. Generally speaking, they do not celebrate women in relation to men. Whereas they retain certain traditional Hindu rituals, hitherto exclusively reserved for males, they have opened these rituals to women and introduced new practices. Amritanandamayi's practice of embracing devotees at public gatherings is a radical departure from the traditional Indian practice of *darśan* where people are not supposed to interact with each other physically. Godavari Ma (1914–1990) was one of the first gurus in modern times to allow *kanyās* to receive Sanskrit training, to memorize *śāstras*, and to perform Vedic sacrifices, thus granting women access to sacred knowledge.[314] Similarly, Anandamayi Ma (1896–1982) established the *Kanyapith*, a Sanskrit school for young girls. She also encouraged certain women to participate in the Vedic ceremony of *upanayana*, with the investiture of the sacred thread. The fact that Anandamayi Ma herself wore a sacred thread most of her life is particularly telling in that regard (Lipski 1996: 57).

Contemporary female gurus also give expression to innovation in adapting traditional forms of spiritual practices to answer to the needs of modern laypeople. Concurrently with an increasing and widening interaction between Indian and Western cultures, one innovation adopted by certain female gurus is the systematic use of inner purification practices during workshops and retreats. Anandmurti Gurumaa makes use of various meditation techniques where catharsis is strongly encouraged as means of bringing about a transformation of consciousness. Whereas purification of the so-called "gross" and "subtle" body and mind through different forms of meditation, visualization, and breathing techniques is a part of traditional Tantric practices, some of these practices are nowadays used to such an extent that they tend to resemble Western therapies. This is especially evident in the cases of Kalki and Amma where retreat participants are invited to lie down on the ground and encouraged to go through their own painful relationships and traumas for hours in order to break through constricting habits and mental patterns. That process is reminiscent of Osho's unconventional and subversive "Neo-Tantric" therapeutic

[314] Field notes, Sakori (Maharashtra), 24.11.2001.

practices in Puna in the seventies and eighties.[315] This wish to reach a Western audience is explicitly mentioned by Anandmurti Gurumaa in a pamphlet. As she puts it, the reason why purification techniques are included in her guided meditations is that she wants to "capture both the flavour of eastern wisdom and pragmatic approach of the West making seekers enjoy best of the both worlds."[316] These few examples explicitely illustrate how elements of a so-called New-Age culture are integrated into traditional spiritual practices.

Didactically speaking, new modes of spreading the word have been introduced by contemporary female gurus along with the development of new technology. Besides traditional spiritual literature available in most *āśrams*, there is increasing use of forms of communication such as CDs, DVDs, video, and audio cassettes. Every day, Anandmurti Gurumaa addresses her worldwide diaspora community, represented in 165 countries, through the *Sony* TV channel, delivering *pravacans* or spiritual lectures, thereby reaching out to her believers. Besides that one-sided form of communication, she also keeps contact with her followers through monthly video chat-sessions on the Internet where she answers questions on spiritual matters and communicates with them in a very personal way. Thanks to these satellite sessions, she claims to be able to work more extensively than she otherwise would do.[317]

In a similar vein, Gurumayi conducts satellite intensives regularly. During these high-tech spiritual sessions, she bestows *śaktipāt* (lit., "descent of grace" or energy transmission) to large crowds of believers in order to awaken their spiritual energy (*kuṇḍalinī*). Given that Tantric *śaktipāt* is traditionally supposed taking place during a personal encounter between guru and disciple, where it is transmitted through a look, a touch, or a word, *Siddha Yoga*'s long distance application of that practice appears to be highly odd and innovative. Gurumayi also communicates through the website, presenting monthly themes intended to be contemplated by her followers.

Female gurus are also innovative at an institutional level. Their spiritual authority, based on inner spiritual experience and inner qualities, rather that on ritualism or book knowledge, provides alternative

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315 Osho, previously known as Rajneesh, lived between 1931and 1990.

316 *A Journey to Truth*, a pamphlet published by the *Rishi Chaitanya Trust* in New Delhi.

317 Interview with Anandmurti Gurumaa in Gannaur (Haryana), 21.1.2006.

forms of religious authority and asceticism outside institutional roles. Mother Meera and Shiva Shakti Amma teach without uttering a single word. Aum Amma's permanent states of deep *samādhi*, making her totally dysfunctional in ordinary life, challenge social expectations of female "respectable" behavior. Madhobi Ma and Sai Rajarajeshwari show through their own examples that spirituality is compatible with married life and householdership. Additionally, Amritanandamayi has succeeded in becoming today's most well-known female guru despite her unprivileged childhood, and guides and counsels huge crowds of people from all "castes" and social backgrounds. She tours foreign countries regularly, an activity rapidly growing ever more frequent among contemporary Indian female spiritual masters.

Whereas *sannyāsa* initiation is still controversial because of its symbolic importance and because of its close association with *brāhmaṇa* ideology, and is therefore still regarded as more powerful than lay roles, female gurus do not consider a lack of formal initiation to be a hindrance to their religious involvement. Some gurus, such as Anandmurti Gurumaa, Anandamayi Ma, and Shree Ma of Kamakhya, are self-initiated. Other women deemphasize the significance of traditional *sannyāsa* initiation, claiming that "true" *sannyāsa* is only a matter of mental attitude.

At a conceptual level, we can see that female gurus re-appropriate and reformulate the concept of God in ways that suit them. Whereas Indian religion provides masculine and feminine perceptions of God, female imagery personifying *śakti* or female energy is highly emphasized in the context of female guruhood. Given that the masculine aspect of God is traditionally considered passive and the feminine one is understood as dynamic, creative, and even ritually superior in Tantric contexts, female gurus re-appropriate the concept of *śakti* in order to promote and legitimate their strength, authority, and power. Moreover, whereas most female gurus in the present study speak of God in masculine terms and address the divine primarily as "God," "Lord," or "Bhagavān," a few refer to it predominantly as "Goddess," seeking blessings and support from the feminine almighty. The example of Shakti Devi claiming to have a deep connection with the goddess Māriyammaṉ is particularly telling in that respect. During my interactions with Shakti Devi, she referred to God exclusively as feminine, making use of expressions every day such as "If the Goddess wish-

es…," "With the Goddess's blessings…," and so forth, thus challenging centuries old patriarchal conceptions of the ultimate reality.[318]

A few gurus strongly challenge traditional conceptions of God. Although Anandmurti Gurumaa encourages prayers and dedication to God in her meditation instructions, we have seen that she also provides innovative and somewhat provocative interpretations on her website, where she rejects the idea of God and of God's existence as nonsense, "fiction," and a "fairytale," fabricated by "charlatans" to "exploit others."[319] What she frequently suggests in her books and discourses is that God should not be understood literally, but instead perceived as a metaphor for the divine. It seems to me that the reason why she often does refer to God is not primarily because she believes in external divine entities, but because she wishes to inspire people to get in touch with their "inner divinity." Kalki and Amma, in turn, believe that divine experiences and states of permanent enlightenment are primarily induced by *dīkṣā*, or transmission of spiritual energy. Rejecting completely the idea that spiritual experiences depend on an external God or Goddess, they claim instead that these have to do with bio-neurological processes taking place in the brain.

There is a multitude of evidence that concurrently with a widespread ongoing questioning of patriarchal values taking place in various religious traditions all over the world, the divine feminine, expressed as divine principle, divine mother, and/or goddess, has gained unprecedented popularity. The emergence of female gurus in public roles is an example of these steadily increasing demands for feminine representations of God among present day believers. Along with that acute demand for feminine religious symbols, we have seen that most Hindus believe that mankind is at the end of the *kaliyuga*, a dark age of distress that is bereft of love. According to a widespread belief, God has chosen to come to the world in the form of a mother in order to meet the specific needs of such dark times. The unique appeal of Amritanandamayi and other female gurus, believed to have descended to earth as *avatārs* in order to restore the declining *dharma* and bestow motherly affection on mankind might therefore be understood in light of these views.

318 E-mail from Shakti Devi, 14.4.2004.

319 www.gurumaa.com/who-is-god.php

While the emergence of female gurus in public roles is growing ever more tangible in contemporary India, their number is still small compared with the number of male *sannyāsīs* and male gurus. Over the past years, however, there has been growing reciprocal interest between India and Western countries, not least economic, generating worldwide contact. This has, among other things, entailed the emergence of an expanding Indian middle-class which has seen its living conditions improve considerably within a short span of time. Whereas my study includes a relatively limited number of female gurus and does not provide any exhaustive picture of the female guru phenomenon, this fact, together with the rapid socio-economic changes taking place in Indian society unavoidably gives rise to some questions which deserve to be the object of further examination in future studies.

It might, for example, be pertinent to ask whether the female guru phenomenon in Hindu spirituality will be temporary or permanent, i.e., whether modernity will give women further opportunities to get access to spiritual leadership. One might also wonder whether the economic growth witnessed today will have a sustained positive impact on Indian women in terms of education. If that is the case, one might ask whether this factor will further influence the development of the female guru "institution." Also worthy of consideration is the role such a possible development will have on the Hindu arena as a whole.

Given the impact of ongoing social change and India's exposure to foreign worldviews, another question to consider is whether alternative ways of living than the pursuit of an ascetic way of life might attract potential male gurus in the near future. One can speculate that if this happens, there can be no question but that female religious actors might indeed take over a spiritual domain so far primarily reserved for men and that their presence might become more visible than what prevails today. Whether such a scenario will prove to be likely or not remains, however, to be seen.

# Sammanfattning

I föreliggande doktorsavhandling har jag undersökt kvinnliga indiska guruer inom dagens hinduism, genom att studera sjuttio av dessa kvinnors andliga karriär, med speciell fokusering på fyra av dem. I mitt urval av guruer är alla kvinnor, alla är indiska, och alla tillhör den breda hinduiska traditionen. Kvinnorna skiljer sig från varandra beträffande ålder, geografisk bakgrund, religiös tillhörighet, civilstånd, utbildningsnivå, socioekonomisk ställning och antal anhängare, så kallade hängivna.

Gemensamma drag kan dock urskiljas i denna mångfald. Samtliga av de sjuttio kvinnorna tillhör någon av de fyra *varṇas*, från *brāhmaṇas* till *śūdras*, och en närmare granskning av deras sociala bakgrund visar att majoriteten av dem, vars *varṇa* går att identifiera, är *brāhmaṇas*. De flesta är dessutom välutbildade och faller inom ramen för nutida, urbana medelklassguruer vars budskap inte nödvändigtvis behöver vara specifikt kvinnligt, utan delvis präglas av nya, vanligt förekommande idéströmningar utanför de traditionella religiösa strukturerna. Medelklasskaraktären av mitt material medför också att mina slutsatser, rent generellt, inte gäller alla kvinnliga indiska guruer verksamma i dagens hinduism utan en majoritet av de sjuttio kvinnorna som är en del av min undersökning.

Enligt gängse sociokulturella och socioreligiösa värderingar beträffande kvinnors *strīdharma* (”kvinnoplikt”), uppmuntras kvinnor att gifta sig, föda åtminstone en son och dyrka sina män som gud. Mot bakgrund av detta har jag undersökt om kvinnorna i mitt material upplever spänningar mellan sina religiösa strävanden och de sociala förväntningar som ställs på dem. Vidare granskar jag hur kvinnorna hanterar dessa spänningar.

Hagiografier berättar idealiserande, men också klart och tydligt, att kvinnliga guruer, från tidiga år, ofta redan från födelsen, anses ha visat tecken på andlig mognad i form av religiösa insikter och gåvor och att de har uppmärksammats för sin brådmogenhet och förmåga att utföra mirakel. Av mitt material framgår att det andliga klimatet under kvinnornas uppväxt, de yttre formerna för dyrkan av gudarna, de religiösa texterna som används, och uppsättningen av gudar och gudinnor som de vänder sig till är en del av den omgivande religiösa

kontexten som i hög grad präglar deras religiösa karriär. Kvinnorna själva avvisar dock sådana beroenden och framhåller att deras val av en asketiskt präglad livsstil har sitt ursprung i en inre kallelse som hos dem har sin förankring i djupa mystiska erfarenheter och som så småningom har kommit att mynna ut i ett tillstånd av permanent upplysning.

När asketism inom hinduismen tidigare uppmärksammats i vetenskapliga studier har fokuseringen oftast gällt män tillhörande *brāhmaṇa*-eliten. Dessa studier har huvudsakligen lagt tonvikten på formella aspekter av indisk religiositet, som till exempel lärotraditionen (*sampradāya*), "traditionskedjan" (*paraṃparā*), och initieringen (*sannyāsa*) med betoning på celibat. Den kvinnliga asketismen som jag har mött skiljer sig markant från den typiska manliga asketismen med dess patriarkala ideal. Även om en majoritet av de behandlade kvinnorna är *brāhmaṇas* har endast ett fåtal av dessa valt att leva i celibat. Vidare har de flesta varken valt *sannyāsa*-initiering eller initierats på ett formellt sätt. Kvinnorna har därmed traditionellt exkluderats från ledande religiösa maktpositioner, för vilka hävdvunna kriterier som överensstämmer med traditionell *brāhmaṇa*-ideologi gäller.

Några av de undersökta kvinnorna har tillgång till maktpositioner genom etablerade religiösa institutioner men de flesta av dem erhåller sin religiösa status genom karismatiska färdigheter. Dessa vilar på vad de hängivna uppfattar som en exceptionell personlighet som inkluderar gudomliga egenskaper. Karisman förstärks ytterligare av föreställningen om *śakti* eller kvinnlig energi. Eftersom de kvinnliga guruerna uppfattas som *śakti*-bärare, och att deras *śakti* antas ha ackumulerats genom andliga övningar eller *tapas* anses de besitta en översinnlig styrka som ger dem högt anseende.

Generellt sett kretsar symboliken i genusstudier ofta kring termer som "makt" och "maktlöshet". Enligt vad som framkommer i min studie är dessa begrepp relaterade till det traditionella indiska *pativratā*-idealet, som handlar om att en dygdig hustru är hängiven sin make i enlighet med *strīdharma*-paradigmet. *Strīdharma* förespråkas för kvinnor som modell för helighet. Enligt denna modell uppfattas äktenskapet som en andlig disciplin eller *sādhana*. På motsvarande sätt hävdar de flesta hinduiska texter (*dharmaśāstras*) att män kan bli upplysta genom att bli *sannyāsins* och därmed avsäga sig världen, medan kvinnor kan utvecklas andligt endast inom och genom äktenskapet.

De flesta nutida kvinnliga guruer förefaller inte betrakta äktenskapet och *strīdharma* som nödvändiga för kvinnors andliga tillväxt men min studie pekar dock på att en majoritet av dem är gifta. Kvinnorna uppfattar inte heller äktenskapet som något större hinder för sin kallelse. Min undersökning visar att en strategi som de, i sin livssituation, tillämpar för att förena dessa till synes motsatta strävanden är att betrakta äktenskapet som underordnat gururollen. Deras val underlättas av *bhakti*-ideologin som öppnar upp religionen för alla. Dessutom bidrar Bhagavadgītās budskap, *tantra* och *śākta*-ideologierna genom att de inte håller fram celibatet som en förutsättning för asketiskt liv.

En minoritet av kvinnorna i studien lever i celibat. De flesta är, som nämnt, gifta, och ett fåtal av dem är antingen änkor, frånskilda eller separerade. Sett ur *brāhmaṇa*-ideologins synvinkel är det särskilt stigmatiserande att vara frånskild kvinna eller änka. Vissa forskare hävdar att kvinnor, genom att välja ett religiöst liv, erbjuds en anständig tillvaro i ett samhälle där omgifte anses vara oacceptabelt men jag har inte funnit några belägg för att så skulle vara fallet i mitt material. Möjligen kunde religiös livsföring tidigare leda till tryggare social ställning för kvinnor. De flesta kvinnorna i mitt material betonar i stället att deras beslut redan i unga år inspirerats och dikterats av en stark längtan efter, och engagemang i, andligt liv.

I ett samhälle där gudinnedyrkan är central är det nog ingen tillfällighet att omgivningen uppfattar de flesta av de sjuttio kvinnorna i mitt urval som inkarnationer av det gudomliga och att kvinnorna, i likhet med manliga andliga mästare, därmed får hög status. Guruernas anhängare upplever att de undersökta kvinnorna förkroppsligar det heliga, medan de flesta guruerna själva hävdar att de bara fungerar som instrument för gudomlig kraft. Gudinnors närvaro i hinduismens panteon förefaller inte automatiskt ge kvinnor hög social status. Huruvida de kvinnliga guruerna genom sin existens utmanar *strīdharma*-paradigmet och faktiskt erbjuder kvinnor emanciperande möjligheter beror, enligt min uppfattning, på vilket perspektiv man anlägger.

Ur ett gängse västerländskt socioreligiöst perspektiv får man intrycket av att de undersökta guruernas uppfattningar är ambivalenta. Jag finner, å ena sidan, belägg för att de utgör en del av den normativa, manligt definierade traditionen när de följer vissa kastrestriktioner. Å andra sidan finns det drag som visar att de överskrider vissa

traditionellt manligt definierade gränser. Det bestående intrycket är dock att trots att guruerna har vissa ambivalenta föreställningar kring de andliga frågorna är denna tvetydlighet relativt marginell jämfört med den okonventionella aspekten av deras personligheter och religiösa utövande.

Medan en kvinnlig guru inte själv gör aktiva insatser för att främja sociala rättigheter eller politisk förnyelse vittnar de hängivna i hennes närhet om att guruns närvaro upplevs som en "revolutionär" och omvälvande erfarenhet. Denna leder ofta fram till en omvärdering av de troendes egna fundamentala föreställningar. I stället för att ifrågasätta patriarkala strukturer som underordnar och marginaliserar kvinnor har den kvinnliga gurun som strategi att förmedla djupa, andliga erfarenheter till sina hängivna. De troende har så stor behållning av sina erfarenheter att de bestämt hävdar att den självtransformering som gurun förmedlar är nödvändig för att åstadkomma sociala förändringar av samhället i stort. Man kan därför säga att den påverkan de kvinnliga guruerna åstadkommer särskilt kommer till uttryck i deras förmåga att initiera subtila inre förändringar hos de hängivna och tillhandahålla kvinnliga förebilder som uppmuntrar till efterföljelse.

På basis av en studie av fyra marginella religiösa kristna grupper från artonhundratalet hävdar Mary Farrell Bednarowski (1980) att fyra kriterier måste uppfyllas för att göra det möjligt för kvinnor att få tillgång till ledande religiösa maktpositioner. För det första anser Bednarowski att det förutsätts en gudsuppfattning som inte betonar betydelsen av manliga gudomligheter. För det andra pekar hon på vikten av en människosyn som inte uppfattar kvinnor som ondskans källa. Vidare lyfter hon fram betydelsen av en uppfattning ifråga om genusroller där äktenskap och moderskap är nedtonade. Slutligen hävdar hon att det behövs en organisation som inte lägger huvudvikten på institutionella former av religiöst ledarskap.

Jag har i föreliggande avhandling använt mig av Bednarowskis klassificeringssystem som utgångspunkt för att strukturera min avslutande argumentation och sammanfattning. Bednarowskis första kriterium angående nedtonade manliga gudomligheter får genklang i mitt material där det klart framgår att föreställningar om det gudomliga inom hinduismen inte är monolitiska utan flytande, och har utrymme för uppfattningar av gud som antingen är personlig, androgyn, eller kvinnlig. Vid sidan av teistiska föreställningar förekommer också

inom hinduismen i stort filosofiska uppfattningar där man tänker sig det gudomliga som en formlös och opersonlig princip (*brahman*). Intressant nog skildras gud ofta som Ardhanārīśvara, d.v.s. som till hälften man och till hälften kvinna. En annan betydelsefull allmänt utbredd föreställning är att gud uppfattas som kvinnlig. Mot den bakgrunden, och med tanke på att de flesta kvinnliga guruerna som presenteras i min studie anses vara manifestationer av gudinnor är det inte svårt att förstå att de får stort erkännande som också ger dem tillträde till religiösa maktpositioner.

Bednarowskis andra kriterium lyfter fram behovet av en vidgad kvinnosyn. Kvinnornas resurser när det gäller att fungera som andliga ledare ifrågasätts vanligen från traditionellt *brāhmaṇa*-håll på grund av kvinnornas påstådda rituella orenhet, men jag har i mitt material inte funnit några belägg för att de undersökta kvinnorna skulle identifiera sig med en sådan föreställning. Tvärtom visar mitt material att kvinnliga andliga ledare har gott självförtroende och är högt respekterade. Som gifta betraktas de vara ”lyckobringande” (*sumaṅgalī*) på grund av *śakti*-kraften som de tros besitta. De flesta kvinnliga guruerna väljer att vistas lika mycket bland män som bland kvinnor samt bland personer från andra kaster och från varierande socioekonomisk bakgrund. Därmed vill guruerna visa att de inte tillskriver kastrestriktioner någon större betydelse. Enligt de hängivna befinner de sig, tack vare sina andliga gärningar, bortom synd och de är dyrkade för sin andliga renhets skull.

Bednarowskis tredje kriterium understryker att i religiösa miljöer där kvinnor vill bli ledare, är det viktigt med kvinnoroller som inte betraktar äktenskap och moderskap som de enda acceptabla rollerna. I denna studie har det dock framkommit att vid sidan av *śakti*-begreppet, som traditionellt förknippas med det kvinnligt heliga, är en annan central faktor förknippad med gudinne- och gurudyrkan av betydelse, nämligen begreppet ”heligt moderskap”, utformat med ”biologisk moderskap” som modell. Allmänt sett är äktenskap, biologiskt moderskap och heligt moderskap centrala element i indisk kultur. I den feministiska diskursen anses dessa begrepp ibland vara tecken på traditionella roller, en iakttagelse som avspeglar sig i Bednarowskis tredje kriterium.

Med referens till Victor Turner (1974) hävdar jag att symboler inte är entydigt klara och givna entiteter, utan kan anta skiftande betydel-

ser beroende på hur de upplevs och tolkas. Mot den bakgrunden kan begreppet moderskap således stå för både positiva och negativa intryck. Adrienne Rich (1976), till exempel, skiljer mellan moderskap som traditionell institution och moderskap som icke-patriarkal erfarenhet. Denna ståndpunkt delas av Sally Kitch (1989) som hävdar att begreppet "heligt moderskap" är en positiv symbol för kvinnor i och med att den omvandlar synen på egenskaper som tidigare betraktats som belastning så att de får drag av styrka. I ljuset av detta resonemang antar jag därför att kvinnliga guruer, genom att tolka begreppet "heligt moderskap" i positiv riktning, får sin känsla av autonomi förstärkt och uppmuntras att eftersträva religiösa maktpositioner. Med andra ord, och i viss motsättning till Bednarowskis tolkning, hävdar jag att begreppet "moderskap", enligt mina iakttagelser, inte behöver uppfattas som ett hinder för kvinnors religiösa framgångar.

Bednarowskis fjärde kriterium markerar nödvändigheten av att hävdvunna institutionella, andliga ledarskapsformer ges alternativ. Helt i linje med hennes iakttagelser visar mitt material att de flesta guruerna får auktoritet via karismatiska, icke-institutionella kanaler och utövar ett religiöst ledarskap som baseras på egna och direkta erfarenheter av det heliga.

Catherine Wessinger (1996) anser för sin del att Bednarowskis fyra kriterier fångar in betydelsefulla aspekter men att de ändå inte är tillräckliga när det gäller att ge kvinnor tillträde till religiösa maktpositioner. Vid sidan av de fyra kriterier som Bednarowski tar upp måste, enligt Wessinger, jämställdhetsfaktorn också tas i beaktande. Resonemanget om "jämställdhet" avser tillgång till högre utbildning och till betydande ekonomiska resurser, möjlighet att bedriva religiösa aktiviteter utanför hemmet, status oberoende av fäder, makar och söner samt förekomsten av värderingar som, ifråga om människosyn, likställer kvinnor med män.

Som tidigare nämnts tillhör de flesta kvinnliga guruerna i mitt urval medelklassen. De är urbaniserade, välutbildade och självständiga, och har relativt god ekonomisk ställning. Med tanke på den prestigefyllda status som tillskrivs guruskapet, och som ytterligare förstärks av begreppet *śakti*, vill jag även understryka att dagens kvinnliga guruer, i allt vidare kretsar, tycks börja uppskattas lika mycket som manliga sådana. Jag har därför den uppfattningen att Bednarowskis fyra kriterier och Wessingers krav på jämställdhet åskådliggör faktorer

som i dagens indiska sociokulturella och socioreligiösa kontext samverkar och ger kvinnor förutsättningar att verka på egna villkor och uppnå ledarskapspositioner. Vissa drag i Bednarowskis resonemang förefaller gälla förhållanden som i dagens samhällssituation har undergått förändring, medan principen om kvinnors och mäns lika värde fortsätter vara aktuell. I stort sett motsvarar de kvinnliga guruerna som presenteras de ovannämnda kriterierna vilket också gör att deras ledarskap tillskrivs stor legitimitet.

Eftersom kvinnliga guruer, i regel, väl känner till traditionerna som är en del av den samtida socioreligiösa kontexten, och också är medvetna om den samtid de lever i, är de naturligt nog intresserade av förnyelse som återspeglar kvinnors erfarenheter. Deras kritiska hållning till det patriarkala arvet utmanar därför väletablerade värderingar, levnadssätt, definitioner och begrepp. Det finns därför fog för antagandet att de kvinnliga guruerna medverkar till att religiösa uppfattningar och sedvänjor på sikt förändras. Avslutningsvis vill jag föreslå att deras bidrag till religionsförnyelse äger rum på flera nivåer: rituellt, didaktiskt, institutionellt och konceptuellt.

Inflytandet på rituell nivå ser man genom att många av dagens kvinnliga guruer innehar prestigefyllda offentliga roller och därmed också utmanar sekler av marginalisering. De guruer som ingår i min studie värderar inte andra kvinnor i relation till män. De har, till exempel, bland sina dagliga religiösa rutiner infört ritualer som traditionellt varit förbehållna män. De ger också uttryck för nyskapande genom att anpassa traditionella former av andlig utövning till moderna människors behov. På didaktisk nivå har de bidragit genom att tillföra nya sätt att sprida budskap genom modern teknologi. Kvinnliga guruer är också nydanande på institutionell nivå. Deras andliga auktoritet som uppfattas som grundad på inre andlig erfarenhet i stället för på ritualism och intellektuell kunskap skapar alternativ till religiös auktoritet och asketism, d.v.s. tillhandahåller en typ av religiositet som är möjlig att förverkliga vid sidan av vedertagna institutionella roller. På konceptuell nivå förefaller kvinnorna utmana traditionella föreställningar av det gudomliga genom att omformulera begreppet ”gud” på ett sätt som överensstämmer med personlig kvinnlig erfarenhet. Med tanke på att indisk religion tillhandahåller både manliga och kvinnliga representationer av det gudomliga är det ingen tillfällighet att bildframställningen av det kvinnligt heliga som *śakti*-bärare

betonas starkt i den religiösa miljö där dagens kvinnliga guruer verkar.

Vid sidan av att ifrågasätta patriarkala religiösa värderingar och inspirera alternativa ansatser har det visat sig att guruernas förmedling av det kvinnligt heliga, uttryckt som antingen gudomlig princip, helig moder, eller gudinna, förefaller ha rönt stor popularitet. Att kvinnor framträder i offentliga guru-roller är ett exempel på tilltagande förväntningar på kvinnliga gudsföreställningar och nya sätt att närma sig det heliga bland dagens troende. Vid sidan av denna längtan efter kvinnliga religiösa symboler hyser en del hinduer idag uppfattningen att mänskligheten befinner sig i slutet av *kaliyuga*, en mörk tidsålder av nöd och kärlekslöshet. Enligt utbredda religiösa föreställningar har gud "valt" att komma ner till jorden i modersgestalt i syfte att möta människornas aktuella, specifika behov. Enligt min uppfattning ska de kvinnliga guruernas tilltagande popularitet ses i ljuset av moderna tolkningar av hinduiska föreställningar, enligt vilka gudomen stigit ner till jorden som *avatāra* för att återställa det förfallna *dharma* och skänka mänskligheten moderlig kärlek.

Även om kvinnliga guruer förekommer allt oftare på den offentliga indiska scenen är deras antal fortfarande litet jämfört med antalet manliga munkar och manliga andliga mästare. De senaste åren har dock ett ömsesidigt intresse mellan Indien och länder i väst, inte minst ekonomiskt, skapat utrymme för en expanderande och allt rikare medelklass. Denna utveckling, tillsammans med de socioreligiösa förändringarna som äger rum i det mångskiftande indiska samhället ger upphov till ytterligare frågor som skulle kunna vara intressanta att beakta i framtida studier.

Det kunde vara relevant att fråga, till exempel, om fenomenet med kvinnor som guruer har kommit för att stanna, det vill säga om moderniteten kommer att fortsatta att öppna möjligheter för kvinnor att fungera på ledande religiösa positioner. Man kan också undra om den ekonomiska tillväxten kommer att ha en fortsatt positiv inverkan på kvinnors utbildningsmöjligheter och hur en sådan utveckling kommer att påverka guru-institutionen. Intressant är också den roll en sådan eventuell utveckling kan komma att spela på den hinduiska arenan som helhet.

På grund av de pågående genomgripande sociala förändringarna som sker i takt med Indiens tilltagande exponering för utländska vär-

deringar kunde frågan ställas huruvida alternativ till traditionell asketism kan komma att attrahera potentiella manliga guruer i den närmaste framtiden. Med tanke på det anseende som är knutet till gururollen förefaller det osannolikt att den skulle försvinna om män börjar välja andra försörjningssätt. Vid en sådan eventuell socioekonomisk utveckling är det dock troligt att kvinnliga aktörer, så småningom, kommer att ta över ledande religiösa funktioner som än så länge, i huvudsak, är förbehållna männen, och att deras närvaro i religiösa sammanhang kommer att vara mera synlig än vad den är idag. Om ett sådant scenario kommer att förverkligas återstår dock att se.

# Glossary

Unless otherwise indicated, all the words of the following glossary are transliterated from Sanskrit.

*abhayamudrā*: hand poised in the gesture of fearlessness
*abhiṣeka*: consecration
*ācāra*: customary observance and code of conduct
*ācārya*: spiritual teacher; preceptor
*ādhāra*: basis, support; sustaining power
*ādiparaśakti*: primordial energy
*advaita*: "Non-dualism"; School of *vedānta* founded by Śaṅkara in the ninth century CE
*āgama*: sacred text
*ahaṃkāra*: the *ego*
*āḻvār* (Tamil): lit. "one who is immersed"; title given by Śrīvaiṣṇavas to twelve poet-saints of the seventh-tenth centuries CE whose 4000 verses they acknowledged as the vernacular Veda
*amaṅgalī (f)*: absence of the well-being or auspiciousness associated with marriage
*ānanda*: bliss
*aṅkuśamudrā*: right hand rising up and fingers curled into the goad posture
*aṇiman*: "shrinking" or the power of becoming as small as an atom; one of Patañjali's "eight perfections"
*āratī*: worship performed morning and evening in front of the *mūrti* of the deity or the guru, expressed by waving a lamp in circles
*araya*: *jāti* of fishermen (Kerala)
*arcana*: from *ārca*, "worshiping, paying homage"; devotional South Indian worship offered to the deity with flowers, *kuṅkum* or saffron
*asamprajñātasamādhi*: *samādhi* without consciousness
*aspṛśya*: untouchable
*āsana*: yogic posture
*aśauca*: impure
*āśrama*; *āśram* (Hindi): spiritual hermitage; one of the four "stages of life"
*atithi*: guest

*ātman*: the individual soul

*avatāra*; *avatār* (Hindi): lit. "descent" manifestation or incarnation of God

*āveśa*: from *viś*, "to enter in"; lit. "entrance into"; benign or self-motivated possession

*āyudha*: weapon

*āyurveda*: Indian medicine

*bhagavān*: Lord; applied to holy males as a term of address

*bhagavatī (f)*: applied to holy females as a term of address

*bhajan* (Hindi): devotional song

*bhākta*: follower of *bhakti*

*bhakti*: from *bhaj*: to serve; devotional love of God

*bhastrikaprāṇāyāma*: dynamic diaphragmatic breathing technique

*bhāva*: spontaneous ecstasy; emotional attitude, "mood", or aspect of the guru or the deity; mode of relationship between God and disciples

*bhāvasamādhi*: absorption without losing consciousness completely

*bhūta*: creature; ghost; good and bad spirit

*bhūtāveśa*: from *bhūta* "spirit" and *āveśa* "possessed"; possessed by a spirit

*bindu*: lit. "point"; central part of the *yantra*

*bodhisattva*: suffering savior in Buddhism

*brahmacārin*: celibate studentship

*brahmacāriṇī*: feminine form for *brahmacārin*

*brahmacarya*: celibate studentship

*brahman*: lit. "expansion, evolution, swelling of the soul"; impersonal god

*brāhmaṇa*; *brāhmaṇ* (Hindi): priesthood

*brahmavādinī*: *fem.*, lit. "the knower of *brahman*"; woman from a Vedic school

*cakra*: lit. "wheel"; center for subtle energy in the body

*caturvarṇa*: four "castes" or *varṇas*: *brahmacarya* (student); *gṛhastha* (householder); *vānaprastha* (forest dweller); *sannyāsa* (renunciate)

*cinmudrā*: from *mudrā*, "gesture" and *cit*, "awareness"

*cit*: consciousness, awareness

*colā* (Hindi): long gown or cloak; long robe

*dakṣiṇā*: gift of money, flowers, fruits, sweets, etc. to the guru or the temple *mūrti*

*dalit* (Hindi): lit. "oppressed"; outside "caste" hierarchy

*dāna*: gift; donation

*daṇḍa*: lit. "stick"; "staff"; staff carried by some *daśanāmī* monks

*darśan* (Hindi): lit. "vision"; "sight"

*daśamahāvidyā*: one of the ten awesome manifestations of the Great Goddess

*daśanāmī*: lit. "having ten names"; Monastic order founded by Śaṅkara

*dayā*: compassion

*devamātā*: mother of the gods

*deva*: male deity

*devī*: female deity

*dhāraṇā*: concentration

*dharma*: duty, law; the Hindu religion itself

*dharmaśāstras*: holy treatises of law, duties

*dhotī*: traditional male Indian garment wrapped around the waist

*dhyāna*; *dhyān* (Hindi): meditation

*dīkṣā*: initiation

*dṛksaṁjña*: sight; gaze

*dvāparayuga*: second cosmic era according to Indian mythology

*dvija*: twice-born

*ekāpatnivrata*: vow to keep to one woman

*gaddi*: lit. "seat"; seat of a lineage

*gariman*, "weight"; one of Patañjali's "eight perfections"

*gāyatrī mantra*: a highly revered mantra, based on a verse from a hymn of the Ṛgveda

*gopī*: female cowherd, companion of the god Kṛṣṇa

*gośālā*; *gośāl* (Hindi): cow-house

*gosvāmin*: lit. "master of the cows"; title of certain *vaiṣṇava* renunciants

*graha*: from *gṛh*, "to grasp"; "to hold"; entity characterized by its ability to grasp or hold; certain kind of *bhūta*; planet

*gṛhastha*: householder; the second of the four classical stages of Hindu life (*āśrama*)

*guru*: spiritual master

*gurukula*; *gurukul* (Hindi): lit. "*guru*'s family"; the house of a guru

*haldi* (Hindi): turmeric or yellow powder with antiseptic properties

*harijan*: son of Hari

*haṭhayoga*: from *haṭha*, "forcible," "voluntary," or "violent"; branch of yoga using bodily postures (*āsanas*), breathing techniques (*prāṇāyāmas*), and meditation (*dhyāna*)

*havelī*: a large house build around a courtyard

*īśitva*: supremacy over the body and the *manas*; one of Patañjali's "eight perfections"

*iṣṭadevatā*: lit. "desired," "cherished," "beloved" deity

*jaḍa*: inert

*jaganmātā*: world mother

*jagadambā*: world mother

*japa*: repetition of a mantra, usually silently, often with the help of a rosary

*jīva*: soul

*jīvanmukta*: liberated while still alive

*jñāna*: knowledge, one of the four paths of yoga.

*kalā*: art or fabrication

*kalaśa*: pot of brass, copper, gold or silver, treated as a representation of God or the Goddess after consecration

*kaliyuga*: lit. "the era of Kali"; fourth cosmic era according to Indian mythology

*kanyā*: lit. "virgin"; girl, virgin, daughter

*karma*: amount of merits and demerits as a result of past actions; one of the four yogas

*karmayoga*: yoga of action

*kāyastha*: *jāti* of administrators (Bengal)

*khel* (Bengali): play

*kheyāla* (Bengali): spontaneous upsurges of divine will

*kīrtan* (Hindi); *kīrtana* (Sanskrit): devotional singing

*kriyā*: lit. "action"; bodily action; by extension: involuntary outer bodily signs of yogic experience, due to the ascension of the *kuṇḍalinī* energy, believed to entail the purification of the subtle body

*kṛpā*: grace

*kṛtayuga*: the first stage of the cosmic era, also called "golden age"

*kṣatriya*: warrior "caste"; noble

*kuṇḍalinī*: spiritual energy believed to be latent in all human beings

*kuṅkum*: red powder used in worship

*laghiman*: "lightness" or the power to become as light as wool; one of Patañjali's "eight perfections"

*lakṣaṇa*: mark; characteristic
*līlā*: divine play of a deity
*liṇga*: phallus symbol
*liṅgāyat*: follower of a religious movement worshiping the *liṇga*
*mā*: mother
*madya*: vine
*mahāsiddha*: prominent possessor of occult powers
*mahāsiddhi*: great occult power
*mahātantra*: great *tantra*
*mahātmā*: great soul
*mahiman*: "illimitability" or the power of touching any object at any distance; one of Patañjali's "eight perfections"
*maithuna*: ritual sexual intercourse
*māmṣa*: meat
*manas*: mind
*mānasa*: belonging to the mind
*maṅgalsūtra* (Hindi): lit. "auspicious thread"; necklace given by the bridegroom to the bride during the wedding ceremony
*mantra*: holy syllable
*mast* (Hindi): lit. "intoxicated, enraptured, blissful"
*mātā*: mother
*maṭha*; *maṭh* (Hindi): monastery
*mātṛ*: mother
*mātṛ-ṛṇa*: the debt one owes one's mother
*matsya*: fish
*mauna*: silence
*mārga*: path
*māyā*: illusion
*mokṣa*: lit. "freedom, liberation" from the cycle of life and death; salvation
*mudrā*: parched or fried grains used in *śākta* and Tantric religious ceremonies; name of particular hand positions or intertwining of the fingers practiced in worship
*mukti*: lit. "setting or becoming free"; salvation
*muṇi*: lit. "a silent one"; sage; hermit
*mūrti*: lit. "solid body or material form"; embodiment, manifestation, incarnation, personification

*nāḍī*: lit. "tubular stalk of any plant or tubular organ (vein, artery)"; in *tantra*, subtle energy channels in the body

*naiṣṭikha brahmacarya*: celibate asceticism

*nakṣatra*: star

*nāmadīkṣā*: initiation with name

*nāmasmaraṇa*: ceaseless remembrance of God through the constant repetition of his/her name

*nirvikalpasamādhi*: concentration upon an entity without separate consciousness of the knower, the knowable, and the process of knowing

*niścalasamādhi*: lit. "motionless" *samādhi*; "without movement"

*niṣkāmakarmayogī*: one who performs one's duties without any thought of consequences for oneself

*ojhā*: exorcist

*pādapūjā*: ritual worship of the feet of the deity, often through ablution with holy water, or substances such as milk and honey, fruit and flowers. After the ceremony, the water of the bath is partaken of as *prasādaṃ* or blessed food by the devotees

*padmāsana*: lotus posture

*paṇḍit* (English form): *paṇḍita* (Sanskrit): Brahmin scholar or learned man

*pañcāmṛta*: lit. "five" (*pañca*), "nectar of immortality" (*amṛtam*); sweet pudding made of five substances

*pañcamakāra*: the five essentials of the left-hand *tantra* ritual

*pañcamahāyajña*: lit. "five" (*pañca*) "great" (*mahā*) "sacrifices" (*yajña*), i.e. *devayajña, brahmayajña, pitṛyajña, bhūtayajña, narayajñabrahmacarya*

*pañcamuṇḍāsana*: the posture of the five skulls

*pañjābī*: lit. "from Panjab"; female garment

*pāppaḍ* (Hindi): spiced crisp bread

*parakāyaprāveśa*: possession

*paramātman*: God

*paraṃparā*: spiritual lineage

*paraśākti*: supreme energy

*pardā* (Hindi/Persian): lit. "curtain", veil; seclusion of women

*paṭṭābhiṣeka*: ritual reminiscent of the traditional anointment of an Indian king performed by a *brāhmaṇa* priest

*pati*: husband; "Lord"

*pativratā (f)*: faithful wife; also, *pativrata (n)*: vow of fidelity to a husband

*pativratādharma*: the duties of a faithful wife; also, *pativratadharma*: the duty consisting in the vow of fidelity to a husband

*pīṭha*: lit. "seat"; sacred place

*pitṛ*: father

*prakṛti*: matter-energy believed to be the basis of all creation

*prāṇa*: life energy

*praṇām* (Hindi): to bow down before a deity or revered person

*prapatti*: total surrender to the divine

*prasād* (Hindi); *prasāda* (Sanskrit); *prasādam* (Tamil): lit. "favor"; "clarity"; blessed food

*pratyabhijña*: recognition

*prākāmya*: "irresistible will"; one of Patañjali's "eight perfections"

*prāṇāyāma*: control of breath

*prāpti*: "extension"; one of Patañjali's "eight perfections"

*pravacan* (Hindi); *pravacana* (Sanskrit): spiritual lecture

*praveśa*: from *pra* "toward" and *viś* "enter", lit. "entrance toward"; possession generated from outside

*prem* (Hindi); *prema* (Sanskrit): love

*pūja*: worship

*pūjāri*: male priest

*pūjāriṇī (f)*: female priest

*puṇya*: lit. "auspicious"; "virtuous"; religious reward or merit

*purāṇa*: lit. "ancient, old"; sacred text

*pūrṇābhiśekha*: lit. "*pūrṇa*, full; *abhiśekha*, bathing"; anointing, consecrating; bathing of the divinity with various substances such as milk, honey, rosewater, sugar, to whom worship is offered

*puruṣa*: lit. "male", "human being"; soul or spirit

*puṣṭimārga*: lit. "path (*mārga*) of nourishment (*puṣṭi*)"

*rājayoga*: from *rāj*, "shining forth", "splendor"; "royal" (*rāja*), or "sovereign" way to union

*rākṣasa*: demon

*ṛṇa*: debt

*ṛṣi*: seer

*rūpa*: form

*sadguru*: "true" guru

*sādhaka*: practitioner; adept

*sādhana*: spiritual discipline
*sādhū*: lit. “good”; “virtuous”; wandering male ascetic
*sādhvī (f)* (Hindi); *sādhavī* (Sanskrit): wandering female ascetic
*sahaja samādhi*: state of natural *samādhi*
*sahasrāra*: *cakra* situated at the top of the head
*samādhi*: trance state where the mind is devoid of discursive thinking
*sampradāya*: teaching tradition
*samprajñātasamādhi*: *samādhi* with conscience
*saṃsāra*: the wheel of rebirths
*saṁskāra*: impression, tendency inherited from past lifetimes
*saṃskāra*: rite of passage
*saṃyama*: meditational discipline
*sanātana dharma*: eternal moral code
*saṅkalpa*: determination in line with specific vows
*sannyāsa*: lit. “total putting away”; renunciation; fourth *āśrama* or stage of life
*sannyāsin*: male renunciant
*sannyāsinī (f)*: female renunciant
*sant* (Hindi): saint
*saptamātṛkā*: “seven mothers”
*sat*: being
*satkarma*: virtuous act; good action
*satsaṅg* (Hindi); *satsaṅga* (Sanskrit): lit., “fellowship with truth”; religious gathering
*satyāgrahī (f)*: from *satya*, “truth” and *graha*, “to grasp”, “to hold”; one grasping truth
*savikalpasamādhi*: concentration upon an entity with separate consciousness of the knower, the knowable, and the process of knowing
*seva*: service
*siddha*: lit. “perfected”; one who has achieved the highest perfection
*siddhi*: occult power
*sindūr* (Hindi); *sindūra* (Sanskrit): lit. “vermilion”; red powder worn in the hair by married women
*smārta*: orthodox Hindu tradition
*smaśāna*: cremation ground
*sparśa*: touch
*stotra*: hymn

*strīdharma*: from *strī*, "woman" and *dharma*, "duty"

*sumaṅgalī (f)*: "an auspicious married one"

*sūtra*: lit. "thread"

*svadharma*: own *dharma* or duty

*svāmī*: lit. "master", "Lord"; Anglicized spelling, *swami*; mark of address for male ascetic initiated into *sannyāsa*

*svāminī (f)*: mark of address for female ascetic initiated into *sannyāsa*

*svarūpa*: own, innermost form

*śaiva*: follower of Śiva

*śālagrāma*: aniconic form of Viṣṇu in the form of a lying stone

*śākta*: follower of the goddess

*śakti*: female principle; female spiritual power or energy

*śaktipāt* (Hindi); *śaktipāta* (Sanskrit): the descent of the *śakti*

*śaktipiṭh* (Hindi); *śaktipiṭha* (Sanskrit), from *śakti* and *piṭh*, "seat", "abode": place of power

*śāstra*: holy text

*śauca*: pure

*śiśu*: child

*śiṣya*: disciple

*śivaliṅgam*: aniconic form of Śiva in the form of a phallus

*śivarātri*: "Śiva's night"; Indian religious festival

*śivir* (Hindi): camp

*śloka*: stanza or particular kind of epic metre

*śrāddha*: completion of funeral ceremonies to ancestors

*śrīcakra*: lit. "the wheel of Śrī"; symbol of the transcendent

*śrīyantra*: widespread and well-known diagram used in *śākta* worship

*śubha*: auspicious; beautiful

*śuddha*: purity

*śuddhādvaita*: pure or purified non-dualism

*śūdra*: servant "caste"

*tap*: (Hindi); lit. "to heat"; "grow hot": vow

*tapas*: lit. "heat"; spiritual austerity, penance, bodily mortification

*tapasya*, from *tapas*: lit. "produced by heat"; belonging to austerity

*tiffin* (Indian English): meal

*tilak* (Hindi); *tilaka* (Sanskrit): sectarian mark made of *kuṅkum*, turmeric or clay, generally worn on the forehead

*tiruviḷakku pūjā* (Tamil): worship of the holy oil lamp performed by a woman for her husband's long life

*tretāyuga*: third cosmic era according to Hindu mythology

*tulasī*: plant considered sacred, used in worship

*tyāga*: renunciation from the fruits of the actions; restraint

*ujjāyī prāṇāyāma*: lit. "victorious breath"; stretching breathing technique

*upadeśa*: initiation; instruction

*upāsanā*: worship; service

*ūrja*: vigor; strength; power; energy

*upanayana*: initiation ceremony for *dvijas*

*vacana*: short prose lyrics written in Kannaḍa

*vairāgya*: inner attitude of mental detachment or equanimity

*vaiṣṇava*: follower of Viṣṇu or one of his *avatāras*

*vaiśya*: farmer, merchant "caste"

*vākyasiddha*: lit. "one whose speech is established"; one whose speech foretells coming events

*vānaprastha*: forest dweller

*varṇa*: lit. "color"; "caste". Term used for the four main divisions of traditional Indian society, ordered hierarchically: *brāhmaṇa, kṣatriya, vaiśya, śūdra*

*varṇāśramadharma*: specific duty (*dharma*) associated with "caste" (*varṇa*) and stage of life (*āśrama*)

*vāsinī (f)*: female resident

*vaśitva*: dominion over the elements; one of Patañjali's "eight perfections"

*vedānta*: the end of the Vedas; one of the six systems of orthodox Hindu philosophy

*vibhūti*: holy ash; supernatural attainment

*viraha*: yearning for God

*vrata*: vow

*yajña*: sacrificial fire

*yantra*: diagram used in *śākta* worship

*yatrakāmāvasāyitva*: fulfillment of desires; one of Patañjali's "eight perfections"

*yoga*: ascetic practice; one of the six philosophical systems of Hinduism

*yuga*: "cosmic era" according to Hindu mythology

*zamindār* (Hindi/Persian): land owner

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Interview 6

2000-12-05, Varanasi (Uttar Pradesh), Sutapa Dutta, 17, Shobha Ma's devotee

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# Appendix 1: List of Indian Female Gurus with Sources

The following list contains the names of the seventy female gurus in this study. When I began this research project, Internet was not widely used and most of women did not have websites of their own. Consequently, homepage addresses have been added to the list successively, at the same time as the gurus' own websites appeared on the net. Apart from the dates and states of birth, and, when appropriate, the dates of death of the women under study, I provide, in alphabetical order, a list of a few of the principal primary and sometimes secondary sources, as well as the Internet links allowing the reader to identify and locate the gurus. Whereas a majority of the primary sources are written by followers and have a hagiographical character, others are biographies, transcriptions of question-and-answer sessions, and compilations of devotees' spiritual experiences. Moreover, a few books have been written by the gurus themselves, in which they explain their views and teachings. In cases where a scholarly study, and in exceptional cases, *several* scholarly studies about a specific guru have been published, these are always included to the following list. Copies of websites below can be provided by the author. For practical reasons, I have chosen to follow the English spelling of the gurus' names such as "Gurumaa" (instead of "Gurumā") or "Sathya Sai Baba" (instead of "Satya Sāi Bābā") throughout the thesis, thus following the praxis used by the gurus and followers.

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**2- Anandamayi Ma (1896–1982), b. West Bengal**

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**7- Aum Amma (1956–), b. Kerala**

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**8- Banasa Lath (1896–1957), b. Rajasthan**

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**12- Chandra Kali Prasada, b. Andhra Pradesh?**

http://www.babuji.org/mathaji.htm

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**13- Ma Devaki, b. Tamil Nadu?**

Ma Devaki is the unofficial successor to Yogi Ramsuratkumar. She lives at *Yogi Ramsuratkumar Ashram* in Tiruvannamalai (Tamil Nadu).

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**21- Gopaler Ma (Aghorimani Devi) (1822–1906), b. West Bengal**

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**22- Gurani Anjali, b. West Bengal**

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**24- Guru Ma Jyotishanand Saraswati**

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**25- Indira Betiji Gosvāmi (1939–), b. Gujarat**

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**30- Karunamayi (1958–), b. Andhra Pradesh**

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**31- Krishnabai (1903–1989), b. Kerala or Karnataka**

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Field notes, 5.11.2000 and 6.11.2000.

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**34- Krishnamayi Devi (1898–), b. Maharashtra**

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Accessed 7.8.2005

**35- Lakshmimani Devi (1864–1926), b. West Bengal**

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**36- Madhobi Ma (1954–), b. West Bengal**

-Khanna, Madhu, "Parallel Worlds of Madhobi Ma, 'Nectar Mother': a Twentieth-Century Tantric Saint", in *Gendering the Spirit*: *Women, Religion and the Post-Colonial Response*, Durre Sammen Ahmed (ed.), Zed Books, London and New York 2002, 136–154.

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**41- Nirmala Devi (1923–), b. Maharashtra**

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**42- Nirmala Pandit Mataji**

http://www.meditation.dk

Accessed 12.8.2003

**43- Om Prakash Yogini**

http://murugan.org/centers/ramji_ashram.htm

Accessed 18.5.2009

**44- Radha Ma**

http://www.sonagiri.org/new-page-23.htm

Accessed 19.4.2009

**45- Radhikananda Saraswati (1948–), b. East Bengal?**
http://www.maakundalini.com
Accessed 29.12.2001

**46- Raja Narayanananda Swamigal (1908–1998), b. Tamil Nadu**
http://www.geocities.com/ongaraashramam/mathaji.html
Accessed 9.9.2004

**47- Rajeshwari Devi (1930–1991)**
http://www.manavdharam.org/jjm/1_brief_into.html
Accessed 18.5.2009

**48- Sai Rajarajeshwari (1947–), b. Karnataka**
-*Srimad Sai Rajarajeshwari Sacharitra*, Authored by The Trust Members, Bhaskar Printers, Mysore 1999.
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http://www.premahealing.com
Accessed 18.5.2009

**49- Rama Devi (1911-1978), b. Karnataka**
http://www.ramambika.com/index.htm
Accessed 24.09.2006

**50- Rama Mata (1955–)**
http://www.inthelight.co.nz/spirit/gurus/ramax002.htm
Accessed 29.4.2004

**51- Santoshi Ma**
Personal contact with Santoshi Ma by e-mail 4.2.2002 (Copy available from the author). Santoshi Ma resides in *Santoshi Mata Ashram* in Kankhal outside Haridvar (Uttarakhand).

**52- Maa Sarveshwari (1943–), Gujarat**
http://swargarohan.org/maa.htm
Accessed 18.5.2009

**53- Shailaja Devi, b. Gujarat?**

http://www.sahajayoga.org/maiya.htm

Accessed 18.5.2009

**54- Devi Shakuntala Gosvāmi (ca. 1936–), b. Uttarakhand**

Personal encounter with Devi Shakuntala Gosvāmi at her *āśram* in Vrindavan in November 2000.

Field notes, 13–14.11.2000.

**55- Shanthamma (1940–)**

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**56- Sharada (1959–), b. Andhra Pradesh**

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**57- Sharada Devi (1853–1920), b. West Bengal**

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**58- Shobha Ma (1921–), b. West Bengal**

-Clémentin-Ojha, Catherine, *La Divinité Conquise*: *Carrière d'une Sainte*, Université de Paris V, Nanterre 1990.

**59- Shyama Ma (1916–1999), b. Uttar Pradesh**

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*Luminaries of Our Time,* Timothy Conway, The Wake Up Press, Santa Barbara 1994, 229–246.

**60- Shakti Devi (pseudonym) (1953–), b. Tamil Nadu**

Material available from the author.

**61- Sharbhani Ma, b. West Bengal?**

Information on Sharbhani Ma living in Shibrampur through Murari Mohan Dey, informant in Kolkata. Field notes, 12.12.2000.

**62- Shiva-Shakti Amma (1942?)**

http://www.sivashakthiammaiyar.com
Accessed 18.5.2009

**63- Siddheshvari Devi (ca. 1960–)**

http://www.divinelovemission.org
Accessed 23.4.2002

**64- Siddhi Ma**

Siddhi Ma is the unofficial successor of Neem Karoli Baba. She lives at *Shri Kainchi Hanuman Mandir and Ashram* in Kainchi near Rishikesh (Uttarakhand). She is referred to in Dr. Jacques Vigne's book, *Le Maître et le Thérapeute*: *Un Psychiatre en Inde*, Albin Michel, Paris 1991, p. 206.

http://www.neemkarolibaba.com
Accessed 16.5.2004

**65- Tara Devi (1930–), b. Karnataka?**

http://www.ramasakthimissiontrichur.org/divinemothertharadevi.html
Accessed 9.12.2007

**66- Umananda Saraswati (Mahayogi) (1916–1985), b. Maharashtra**

http://www.maakundalini.com
Accessed 29.12.2001

**67- Usha Ma (1925–1992), b. Uttar Pradesh**

-Shubh, Nisha, Dr., *The Splendour of Vrindaban*: *Saint Ushaji*, Vraj Nidhi Prakashan, Vrindaban 1995.

**68- Vanamali Devi**

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Accessed 29.9.2006

**69- Ma Yoga Shakti (1927–), b. Uttar Pradesh**

-Johnsen, Linda, *Daughters of the Goddess*: *The Women Saints of India*, Yes International Publishers, St. Paul, Minn., 1994.

http://www.yogashakti.org

Accessed 14.9.2004

**70- Yogin Ma (Yogindra Mohini Bhiswas) (1851–1924), b. West Bengal**

-*Great Women of India*: *The Holy Mother Birth Centenary Memorial*, Madhavananda, Swami and Ramesh Chandra Majumdar (eds.), Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta 1997, Calcutta 1997, 441-448.

# Appendix 2: List of Visited *Āśrams*

1- Amritanandamayi, *Mata Amritanandamayi Math*, Amritapuri (Kerala)

2- Anandamayi Ma, *Shree Shree Ma Anandamayee Ashram*, Kankhal, close to Haridvar (Uttarakhand)

3- Anandmurti Gurumaa, *Guru Maa Ashram*, Gannaur, close to Sonepat (Haryana)

4- Anasuya Devi, *Sree Viswajananee Parishat*, Jillellamudi, close to Guntur (Andhra Pradesh)

5- Archanapuri Ma, *Sree Satyananda Mahapeeth*, Kolkata (West Bengal)

6- Aum Amma, Tiruvannamalai (Tamil Nadu)

7- Indira Betiji, *Vrajdham Spiritual Centre*, Manjalpur, close to Vadodara (Gujarat)

8- Godavari Ma, *Shri Upasani Kanya Kumari Sthan*, Sakori, close to Rahata (Maharashtra)

9- Gurumayi, *Gurudev Siddha Peeth*, Ganeshpuri (Maharashtra); *Shree Muktananda Ashram*, South Fallsburg (USA).

10- Jnanananda Sarasvathi, *Sri Gnana Advaitha Peetam*, Chennai (Tamil Nadu)

11- Karunamayi, *Karunamayi Shanti Dhama*, Bangalore (Karnataka)

12- Krishna Ma, Mathura (Uttar Pradesh)

13- Krishnabai, *Anandashram*, Ramnagar, close to Kanhangad (Kerala)

14- Madhobi Ma, *Matrika Ashram*, Dakshinpuri, close to Delhi

15- Mate Mahadevi, *Basava Mantapa*, Bangalore (Karnataka)

16- Mother Meera, *Schloss Schaumburg*, Oberdorf (Germany)

17- Mira Alfassa, *Sri Aurobindo Ashram*, Pondicherry (Tamil Nadu)

18- Sai Rajarajeshwari, *Srimad Sai Rajarajeshwari Spiritual Centre*, Karekura (Karnataka)

19- Shakti Devi (Tamil Nadu)

20- Devi Shakuntala Gosvāmi, Vrindavan (Uttar Pradesh)

21- Sharada, Tiruvannamalai (Tamil Nadu)

22- Sharada Devi, *Belur Math*, Belur, close to Kolkata (West Bengal)

23- Shiva Shakti Amma, *Sri Sivasakthi Ammaiyar Ashram*, Tiruvannamalai (Tamil Nadu)

24- Shobha Ma, *Sant Ashram*, Varanasi (Uttar Pradesh)

25- Shyama Ma, *Shri Shyama Ashram*, Vrindavan (Uttar Pradesh)

26- Ma Yoga Shakti, *Ma Yoga Shakti Marg*, Kankhal, close to Haridvar (Uttarakhand)

I met Acarya Meenakshi Devi at a conference at the United Nations in Geneva (Switzerland) in 2002. I have also met a few female gurus not listed here, primarily in Vrindavan, and the couple Kalki and Amma in Andhra Pradesh. Although I have never met Santoshi Ma (Uttarakhand) and Radhikananda Saraswati (Maharashtra), I have had mail and/or e-mail correspondence with them.

# Table: *Varṇa*; Place of Birth; Education; Marital Status; Children; Related Gurus

Here follows a table of the female gurus whose personal details I was able to identify. As previously mentioned, getting access to information about factors such as age, *varṇa* affiliation, or level of education was not always possible. As the table shows, out of thirty-four women, twenty-two have *brāhmaṇa* origins, two are *kṣatriyas*, one is *vaiśya*, and three are *śūdras*. Moreover, I have listed gurus with "royal," "noble," or "aristocratic" origins, well aware that these can be found among *brāhmaṇas, kṣatriyas*, *vaiśyas*, as well as *śūdras*.

The dividing-line between married and widowed women is not always clear because several married women are also widowed. Those labeled as "widowed" are women who became gurus after their husbands' death, however not *necessarily* because of their widowed status as I argue in my study.

| Name | Birth date | Birth state | Caste etc. | Education | Marit. Stat. | Children | Related guru |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Amritanadamayi | 1953- | Kerala | śūdra | 4th grade | celibate | none | — |
| Anandamayi Ma | 1896-1982 | West Bengal | brāhmaṇa | low primary | married | none | — |
| Anandi Ma | 1958- | Gujarat? | — | — | married | none | Madhusudandas |
| Anandmurti Gurumaa | 1966- | Punjab | — | BA | celibate | none | — |
| Anasuya Devi | 1923-1985 | Andhra P. | brāhmaṇa | — | married | 3 children | Desiraju Rajamma |
| Archanapuri Ma | 1928- | West Bengal | — | gurukul | celibate | none | Satyananda |
| Aum Amma | 1956- | Kerala | — | — | — | — | — |
| Banasa Lath | 1896-1957 | Rajasthan | — | basic | married | 5 children | Baldev |
| Bhagwatidevi Sharma | 1926-1994 | — | brāhmaṇa | — | married | — | — |
| Brahmajna Ma | 1880-1934 | East Bengal | — | uneducated | widowed | none | — |
| Chalanda Sai Ma Lakshmi D. | 1955-? | Mauritius | — | — | — | — | S. Sai Baba |
| Chandra Kali Prasada | — | Andhra P.? | — | — | — | — | Hanumath Kali V.P. |
| Ma Devaki | — | Tamil Nadu? | brāhmaṇa | M.Ph. Physics | — | — | Ramsuratkumar |
| Devi Amma | — | — | — | — | — | — | S. Sai Baba |
| Ganga Ma | 1904?-1983 | West Bengal | — | — | widowed | — | Santadas |
| Gayatri Devi | 1906-1995 | East Bengal | — | — | widowed | — | S. Paramananda |
| Gauri Ma | 1857-1938 | West Bengal | brāhmaṇa | gurukul | celibate | none | Ramakrishna |
| Gita Bharati | 1944- | Haryana | — | — | — | — | Hariharanand |
| Godavari Ma | 1914-1990 | Maharashtra | brāhmaṇa | gurukul | separated | none | Upasani Baba |
| Golap Ma | 1840's-1924 | West Bengal | brāhmaṇa | — | married | 2 children | Ramakrishna |
| Gopaler Ma | 1822-1906 | West Bengal | brāhmaṇa | uneducated | widowed | — | Ramakrishna |
| Gurani Anjali | -2001 | West Bengal | — | — | married | — | — |
| Gurumayi | 1955- | Karnataka | — | gurukul | celibate | none | Muktananda |

| Name | Birth date | Birth state | Caste etc. | Education | Marit. Stat. | Children | Related guru |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Guru Ma Jyotishanand S. | | Rajasthan | — | PhD Astrology Separated | separated | 2 children | — |
| Indira Betiji Goswami | 1939- | Gujarat | brāhmaṇa | MA Sanskrit | celibate | none | — |
| Indira Devi | 1920-1998 | West Punjab | — | well-educated | separated | 2 children | Dilip Kumar Roy |
| Janaky Matha | 1906-1969 | Kerala | — | — | married | 7 children | Ramana Maharshi |
| Jnanananda Saraswati | 1929- | Kerala | noble | College stud. | married | 5 children | — |
| Kalavati Devi | 1908-1978 | Karnataka | — | 3th grade | widowed | 2 children | Siddharudh M. |
| Karunamayi | 1959- | Andhra P. | — | BA | celibate | none | — |
| Krishnabai | 1903-1989 | Karnataka | brāhmaṇa | 2nd grade | widowed | 2 children | Ramdas |
| Krishna Ma | 1939-1999 | Uttar Pradesh | brāhmaṇa | Home studies | celibate | none | — |
| Mata Krishna | 1929? | Pakistan | kṣatriya | College stud. | — | — | Bankey Behari |
| Krishnamayi Devi | 1898- | Maharashtra | brāhmaṇa | — | married | 2 children | — |
| Lakshmimani Devi | 1864-1926 | West Bengal | brāhmaṇa | — | — | — | Ramakrishna |
| Madhobi Ma | 1954- | West Bengal | brāhmaṇa | — | married | 3 children | Shankar Khepa |
| Shree Ma of Kamakhya | 1945- | Assam | — | BA | celibate | none | Ramakrishna |
| Mate Mahadevi | 1946- | Karnataka | noble | MA Phil. | celibate | none | Lingananda S. |
| Meenakshi Devi | 1968-2006 | — | brāhmaṇa | | celibate | none | Ramanand Pra-panna |
| Mother Meera | 1960- | Andhra P. | kṣatriya | gurukul | married | none | Aurobindo |
| Nirmala Devi | 1923- | Madhya P. | royal | Medical stud. | married | 2 children | — |
| Nirmala Pandit Mataji | — | — | — | — | married | — | Faqir Chand |
| Om Prakash Yogini | — | — | — | — | — | — | Ramsuratkum. |
| Radha Ma | — | Andhra P. | — | — | married | — | — |
| Radhikananda Saraswati | 1948- | East Bengal? | brāhmaṇa | — | married | 1 child | Umanand. S. |
| Raja Narayanananda Swamigal | 1908-1998 | Tamil Nadu | — | — | married | 2 children | — |

| Name | Birth date | Birth state | Caste etc. | Education | Marit. Stat. | Children | Related guru |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Rajeshwari Devi | 1930-1991 | Uttarakhand | — | — | married | — | Hans Ji Maharaj |
| Sai Rajarajeshwari | 1947- | Karnataka | brāhmaṇa | College stud. | married | 3 children | S. Sai Baba |
| Rama Devi | 1911-1978 | Karnataka | — | — | married | — | — |
| Rama Mata | 1955- | — | — | — | married | 3 children | Keshavadas |
| Santoshi Ma | — | — | — | — | — | — | — |
| Maa Sarveshwari | 1943- | Gujarat | — | BA Gujarati | — | — | Yogeshwar |
| Shailaja Devi | — | — | — | — | married | 2 children | — |
| Devi Shakuntala G. | — | — | brāhmaṇa | uneducated | widowed | 1 child | — |
| Shantamma | 1940- | — | — | — | married | — | — |
| Sharada | — | Andhra P. | brāhmaṇa | 8th grade | celibate | none | Lakshmana S. |
| Sharada Devi | 1853-1920 | Bengal | brāhmaṇa | uneducated | married | none | — |
| Shobha Ma | 1921- | Bengal | śūdra | 8th grade | celibate | none | Santadas |
| Shyama Ma | 1916-1999 | Uttar Pradesh | śūdra | — | separated | — | — |
| Shakti Devi | 1953- | Tamil Nadu | vaiśya | BSc. Maths | divorced | 2 children | — |
| Sharbani Ma | — | — | — | — | — | — | — |
| Shiva-Shakti | 1943 or 1944 | Tamil Nadu | brāhmaṇa | — | married | 3 children | — |
| Siddheshvari Devi | 1960-? | Punjab | — | MA Linguistic | celibate | none | Kripalu Maharaj |
| Siddhi Ma | — | — | — | — | married | 2 children | Neem Karoli |
| Tara Devi | 1930- | — | — | — | married | — | — |
| Umanand Saraswati | 1916-1985 | Maharashtra | brāhmaṇa | — | — | — | — |
| Usha Ma | 1925-1992 | Punjab | — | MA Hindi | celibate | none | — |
| Vanamali Devi | 1938-? | Kerala | — | MA Phil. | married | 2 children | — |
| Ma Yoga Shakti | 1927- | Uttar Pradesh | aristocratic | MA Pol. Sc. | married | — | — |

| Name | Birth date | Birth state | Caste etc. | Education | Marit. Stat. | Children | Related guru |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Yogin Ma | 1851-1924 | West Bengal | aristocratic | uneducated | separated | 2 children | Ramakrishna |

The rich and complex history of Hinduism has primarily been written by male scholars and has documented the point of view of male spiritual strivings. This fact, together with patriarchal opinions expressed in many authoritative sacred texts, has contributed to creating an image of Indian spirituality in which female religious experience is either absent or considerably marginalized. This study deals with the steadily growing number of Indian women assuming public religious leadership roles within Hinduism today. Many of these women contradict the usual social expectations of female subordination and promote a renewed awareness of age-old perceptions of God as the divine feminine.

Within the framework of the spiritual careers of seventy gurus, the phenomenon of contemporary female guruhood is investigated. Questions asked are, among others: How do female gurus participate in Hindu traditions? What expectations are placed on them? How is the guru's religious position legitimated? How are the dual roles of woman and guru adapted to each other? Does the centrality of goddess imagery in Indian spirituality reflect a positive evaluation of women in everyday life? Does the spiritual involvement of female gurus contribute to shaping and transforming Indian religious discourses and practices?

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